

His for the *Holidays*

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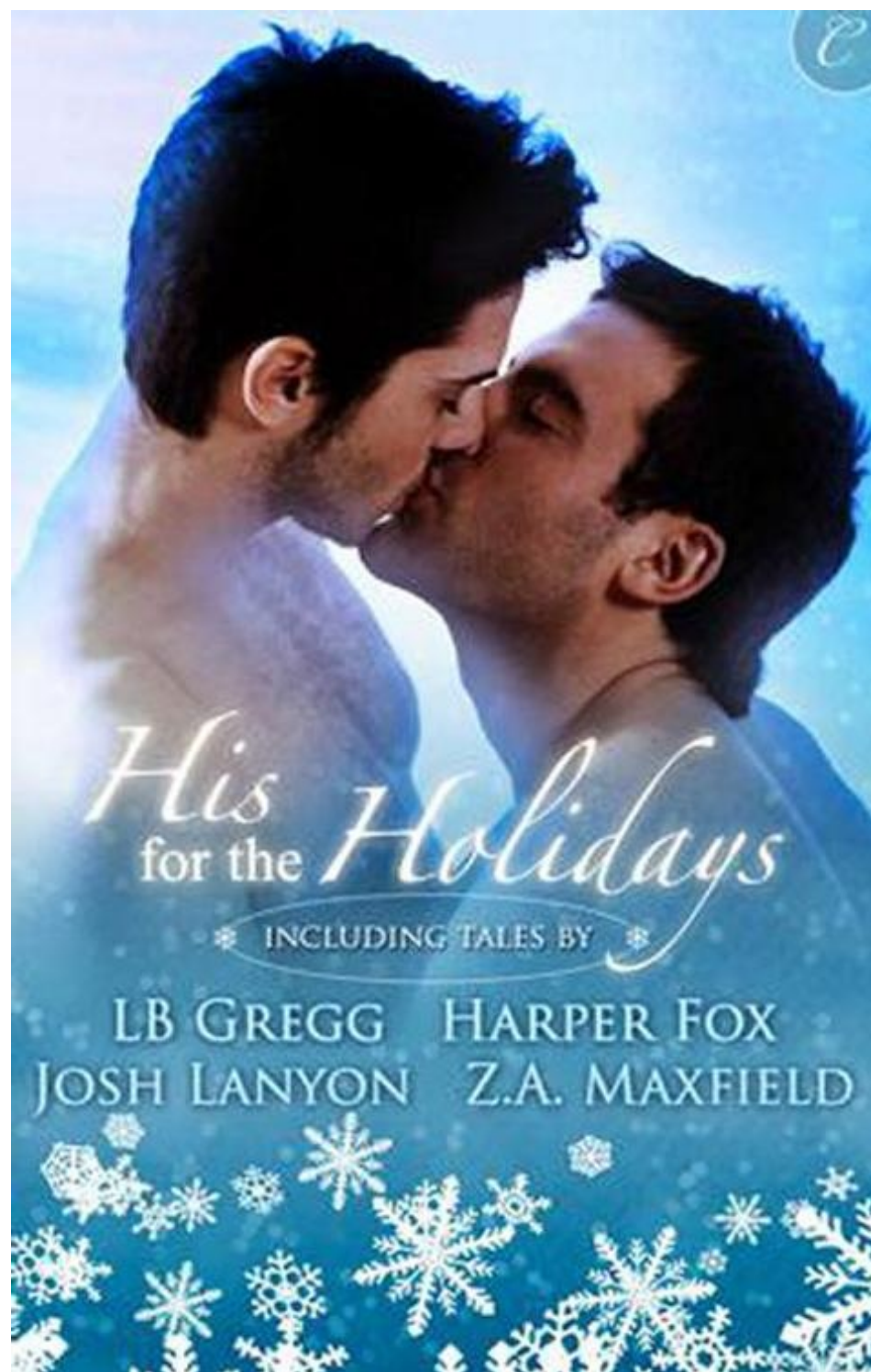
LB GREGG

HARPER FOX

JOSH LANYON

Z.A. MAXFIELD







His For The Holidays

Spicing Up the Season

Hope brightens a bleak Edinburgh December. A man gets a second chance with his high school crush. A decade-long game of cat and mouse comes to a passionate conclusion. And Santa Claus drives a red muscle car. Heat up your holidays with this collection of four festive tales from some of the top talent in the male/male genre.

Anthology includes:

Mistletoe at Midnight by LB Gregg

Nine Lights Over Edinburgh by Harper Fox

I Heard Him Exclaim by Z.A. Maxfield

Icecapade by Josh Lanyon

Stories also available for purchase separately.

Dear Reader,

There's something magical about the holiday season, whether you celebrate Christmas or Kwanzaa, Hanukkah or Diwali. The energy and excitement surrounding these holidays charges the air and our emotions, providing a perfect platform for romance and love. So I knew we couldn't let Carina Press's first holiday season pass without celebrating it with a collection of special novella releases.

This holiday season, celebrate with our first collection of invitation-only novellas. We've pulled together eleven talented authors and author duos, all of whom have made their mark in their respective niches, and invited them to transport our readers with holiday delights. In *Naughty and Nice*, join Jaci Burton, Lauren Dane, Megan Hart and Shannon Stacey as they show you both the sensual and sweet sides of the holidays. Visit post-apocalyptic worlds and paranormal beings in an enchanted journey with authors Vivi Andrews, Moira Rogers and Vivian Arend in *Winter Wishes*. And celebrate the beauty of the season in *His for the Holidays* with m/m authors Josh Lanyon, Z.A. Maxfield, Harper Fox and LB Gregg.

Through the talent of their writing and their captivating storytelling, I believe you'll find something in each of these special novellas to put you in the magic of the holiday moment.

Wishing you the happiest of holiday seasons.

~Angela

Executive Editor, Carina Press

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Mistletoe at Midnight

By LB Gregg

Owen McKenzie has traveled to Vermont to spend an old-fashioned Christmas with his family when he finds himself staying at the same inn as his first love. Owen is disconcerted to realize he's still attracted to Caleb Black but refuses to pursue him. Caleb left him once, and Owen's not going down that road again.

Caleb is ready for a second chance with Owen and gets it when fate and the matchmaking McKenzies conspire to strand the two men in a rustic cabin during a snowstorm on Christmas Eve. Can Caleb convince Owen to rekindle their romance so they can stop spending their holidays apart?

To My Darling Girl—the incomparable KA Mitchell.
You'll always be Vegetarian Meal Ticket to me.

Chapter One

Evergreen looked exactly as it had online. From across the river it was picture-postcard perfect, almost as if some Christmas miracle had brought my mother's favorite Currier Ives cookie tin to life. A smoky gray tendril rose from the chimney of the sprawling white farmhouse. The snow-laden fields were sectioned by hundred-year-old stone walls, the Green Mountains framed the horizon, and any second now, my truck would fall through the warped boards of the dilapidated covered bridge.

The truck dipped into a pothole and Jake grunted from the passenger seat. He tilted his head as only a beagle can and gave me his *are-we-there-yet* look.

"Almost."

In reality, I had no clue. My family was coming for Christmas to see my new hometown, but I wasn't familiar with the area yet. I'd let my brother pick our holiday spot, and apparently Ryan had chosen a place on the North Pole. We were at least fifteen minutes from St. James's center and there hadn't been a house for miles, never mind another car. The dirt road was plowed, at least, and the fields on either side of the river were laced with snowmobile trails. Just a few minutes ago, I'd maneuvered around an unmoving moose.

I'd get used to this. As St. James's newest veterinarian, I'd be meeting all kinds of interesting wildlife.

I just needed to survive Christmas with my meddlesome family first.

The last time I was home, I'd put my foot down with my well-meaning mother—*no more surprises*. No dates. No set-ups. No mysterious guests. No kindly actuaries waiting in the parlor to have an impromptu dinner. I had been ambushed at every event since Keith Turner walked away months ago and, frankly, I was done. How could anyone, specifically my *mother*, presume to know what I wanted when I didn't know that myself?

The thin road entered another shadowy tunnel, this one formed by the gentle arching bows of the towering pines that lent the inn its name. We came around

the lazy bend and there it was. Evergreen.

I pulled to a halt on the snow-custed driveway, parking at the very end of the line of cars, and shut the engine off. I had to be the last. It was the unwritten rule. Late to my own funeral, Mom always said.

The stars shone clear and merry above the distant mountains and barred owls hooted high in the pines as I climbed stiffly from the truck. Icy air frosted my lungs. Jake wobbled sleepily from the front seat, his white tail stiff, and he stared at me for a moment before lumbering down the shoveled walk to sniff the frigid new scenery. I grabbed the bags.

We entered the inn, jostling the strap full of sleigh bells hanging over the door, and music and warmth enveloped us. The smell of something cooking...apples and cinnamon and clove...the pervasive scent of balsam pine. It smelled like Christmas on steroids. Doug Winters had called the place *homey* and he hadn't lied.

I set my bag down on the braided rug and, like any good hound, Jake sat his ass on the carpet and scratched lazily at his floppy ear. We both looked around. The front hall was empty. Noise floated from the back. On a narrow table, a bowl of clementines sat beside a closed laptop and a small service bell—which I rang just because it was there. *Ding ding ding*.

Of course, no one could hear me over the crescendo of my mother's wavering soprano as it crested through the gigantic house. She banged out "Jingle Bells" in the same walloping manner that I'd rung the service bell.

The owners didn't appear to stand on formality or they'd have someone working the desk. Leaving my coat on the peg by the door, I went in search of my musically felonious family.

"Jingle Bells" ended with applause and laughter precisely as I entered a sprawling parlor decorated straight from Hallmark. A baby grand piano took up one end of the room, where a blond man in a wheat-colored sweater gathered his music and stood. His back faced me, but I could still see he was young and attractive, if you went for that kind of slender, artist type. There were a dozen other guests lingering—a quick glance counted five of them were McKenzies.

My parents, my uncles and my brother. My fair-haired mom hovered by the carefully hung stockings. She had her tiny backside to the fireplace and clutched a cut-crystal tumbler of amber liquid.

Her eyes, robin's-egg-blue like my own, lit when she saw me towering in the doorway. "Owen! You're here! We were about to send a search party."

"You always say that but Jake and I make it anyway." Of course, my dog had conveniently disappeared.

I took a careful step into the room and my mother rushed over with the inherent grace of a long-time ballerina. Her rounded arms were wide open. "I was so worried! The roads are slick."

"I'm fine. It was a nice drive and I need to get used to it."

"I told her you were fine. You're thirty-three, not sixteen." My dad clapped me shakily on the shoulder.

"Don't remind me."

Jesus. He'd *shrunk* since Thanksgiving. Dad's hair was always thin, but now it was more so because the strawberry-blond strands faded into his scalp. His shirt gaped at the collar, hanging limply on once wide shoulders, and his skin was anemically pale. I wanted to put my arms around him. Instead I found a smile and shook his bony hand as worry cramped my heart. I searched the room for my brother. We'd have to discuss this later. Dad was still in remission—had been for fifteen years.

Someone should have called me.

Ryan, who could almost pass as my twin, lounged in the corner chatting with a smiling titian-haired woman. He didn't look worried in the least. He looked interested. Of course, Ryan always looked interested if there were even a snowball's chance in hell he'd dip his wick before the holiday was over. He caught my eye and nodded.

My uncles Archie and Duncan sat on the couch playing gin. Before I could wave hello, not that either of them could see me from this distance, Mom

chattered, “Owen. You’ll never guess who’s here. This is just extraordinary.” She quickly added, “I had nothing to do with it.”

“Patricia, give him a minute.”

I clued in to the strain in my father’s voice. Ryan grinned and something like anticipation skated across his features. That bastard lifted his glass mockingly and I knew trouble was brewing.

I scanned the room. “Hmmm. Well you didn’t invite anyone, right? Because we discussed that.”

“I had nothing to do with this.”

“Nothing to do with what? And why don’t I believe you?”

I followed Ryan’s gaze to the far end of the great room until I found the pianist again. He leaned comfortably against the baby grand, reading his sheet music. His collar was unzipped and a plain white T-shirt showed at his neck. He didn’t scream “actuary” at least. He was my age, maybe a little younger, and even without a red bow or a gift tag, Ryan’s duplicitous grin warned me that this man was “Owen’s Christmas Present” from our meddlesome mother. Jake, that traitor, sat wagging his tail at the man’s feet, looking for a handout.

The guy flipped through the pages of a loose-leaf music book. The way he stood, leaning easily on the baby grand, seemed almost... *familiar*, but I couldn’t place him.

“What a coincidence to find him here, and on Christmas, no less,” Mom said. “It’s providential.”

A portly gentleman hustled into the parlor and distracted me with his outstretched hand. “Dr. McKenzie?”

“Owen. Please.”

He nodded and his eager hand pumped my arm heartily. “I’m Doug Winters. Katie is in the kitchen—did you bring your bags in? You’re on the third floor—the yellow room.”

“Thanks. I’d like to change and maybe have a drink before dinner.”

My gaze was drawn back to the pianist as a clump of hair fell across his forehead and he absently shoved it back. That tiny motion triggered some deeper memory. I should know him. He had trim, light sideburns and long, graceful fingers. He flipped through a music book with *Holiday Sing-a-long* written on the cover.

He raised his chin, turning to speak with the red-haired woman, and we both froze as his casual glance collided with my curious one.

No way.

No. Fucking. Way.

I squinted to make sure. In fifteen years and hundreds—thousands—of miles, those distinctively pale, lichen-green irises could only belong to one man.

Caleb Black.

What in the hell was he doing here? His strangely beautiful eyes blinked at me from across the room, and he dropped the book. Papers scattered across the carpet like fallen leaves. Neither of us bothered to look at the mess.

I let go of Doug Winters’s hand and a glass of something that smelled like Johnnie Walker was pressed into my palm.

Part of me functioned. The innkeeper prattled about my accommodations—as if I cared where the hell I was sleeping. I wanted to run, and I had a house in St. James I could hide in—though it wasn’t technically mine until after the twenty-eighth.

Ryan said something, but my attention was riveted on the slim, attractive *leaner* who apparently was a musician now—an unexpectedly blond and dangerously good-looking musician who truly had no business being here. His jaw was still firm, the broad planes of his face as striking as I remembered, but the bump on the bridge of his nose was new and evidence of an old fracture. It made him more appealing than ever.

Jesus, Owen, do something.

There are times—and you know damn well that you’re going to regret it—when you can’t force yourself to smile or shake hands, murmur hello, blink or even shut your gaping pie-hole and do *something*. As I gawked at him with the fire crackling beside me, the entire world just fell away.

Chapter Two

Fifteen Years Earlier

Backlit by a shaft of afternoon sunlight, Caleb Black waited in the same spot—right beside the water fountain in the student-packed hall—every afternoon. He *leaned* as if leaning was a new form of art and he was its undisputed master. Eased against that battered row of metal lockers, waiting for God knows what, he always made me feel too big and awkward for my own dumb feet.

Caleb Black. Just the thought of his name brought a tide of shame to stain my face, and even so, wicked lust poured through my body and flooded my groin.

Since the day he'd first arrived at Mills wearing those banged-up Doc Martens, I'd noticed him. Everyone noticed him. Hell, the sunlight noticed him. With a stud in his ear, a wide silver band on the second knuckle of his middle finger, and a thin Violent Femmes T-shirt under his worn corduroy jacket, Caleb leaned and I couldn't keep my damn eyes off him.

Every afternoon, right after lunch, I passed him on my way to Mr. Clarke's Honors Calculus class. A single glance from Caleb Black was all it took to undo me. Head above the crowd, I'd move as unobtrusively as possible staring straight ahead and praying my dick wouldn't get any harder. I'd hike my backpack high and resolve to pass that slouching leaner *unaffected* before the fifth-period bell rang. Which was futile, of course, because as Caleb slouched indolently against the lockers with his left knee raised and his bootlace untied—those shining eyes watching me—my blood absolutely boiled. Sometimes he'd stare and bite the side of his thumb, his white teeth worrying the tough skin there, and I'd just die at the flash of his berry-red tongue.

He'd catch me looking, and from across that crowded hallway the entire world disappeared. The smell of warm sneakers and last night's disinfectant faded, and everything—the voices in the hallway, the metallic squeak of locker doors opening and closing, the cheesy posters and the endless chatter, the dazzling sunlight reflecting off waxed tile—everything on the planet paled in comparison to his green eyes. My stomach would flutter until it flipped to the floor because inside that prolonged second, I couldn't have felt more bumbling, or unsure, or

tall—or turned on.

Caleb rested with a fist shoved deep inside his winter coat, chewing his lip or his thumb or sighing and leaning like a champ—and whatever he did, I wanted him. By the time that stupid fifth-period bell freed me, my palms would be slick and my dick would be noticeably, *painfully* stiff. I'd hightail it to class almost at a run and waste half an hour swearing that I was never going to class again with a Caleb Black induced boner.

I was failing calculus.

The first time in my life I wasn't passing a class, and I didn't care. Because all I wanted in the world was to wrestle Caleb to the floor, like I did Ryan. Only not so brotherly. I'd pin his shoulders flat against the carpet. I'd throw him down. Tackle him in a hold that would align our hips and shoulders. His legs would clench strong and tight around my thighs. He'd smell like salt and chewing gum and he'd struggle. Sweating, wriggling and straining his slim body square underneath me. His skin would be soft on the inside of his wrists as I pinned them down. He'd be whisker-rough along his jaw, and bone-hard against my hips.

His eyelashes would lie like black fringe on the tender skin below his eyes.

Focus. There was a calculus test today. I was ready. I had a history test—facts and dates and names swirling in a fast flowing vortex that I need to memorize by last period. My dad was sick, I had work to do, and I was obsessed over Caleb Black. *Leaning.*

My heart skipped because there he was, cutting a dark contrast against the battered row of lockers, same as every single day.

Don't look.

I canned all my weak thoughts about another kid's fucking *eyelashes*—I was creeping myself out—and stared at the far window. The sky was gunmetal-gray with the threat of the first real snow of the season and I refused to look left—because I wasn't queer. I was Owen McKenzie and I wouldn't cave. I wouldn't glance, not one time, at the scruffy raven hair, or those intelligent eyes, or his

ridiculously thick lashes. And certainly I wouldn't notice the shocking wedge of unlikely sapphire-blue that draped Caleb's smooth forehead as he rested with tired nonchalance against locker number 244. *My locker.*

That meant something, right? But *no*. I wouldn't stop because I'd do something stupid, say something I'd regret.

Please look at me.

As if Caleb read my mind, he did look. As he did every single day. He saw me coming, impossible not to, and caught me staring. My stomach did its predictable thing and flipped over like a trained dog. Lust stained me strawberry-red—and I knew he could see it. He knew and I knew and we knew and like a tractor beam, Caleb drew me forward. He could expose me—and at the same time—he was safety, because he was exactly like me. Caleb was a beacon in this terrifying new world where I no longer knew the landscape.

The noise, the smell, the sights—all of it vanished. I wanted to make that connection. To lift a hand and wave hello or comment on the book tucked under his arm, the same book I'd seen him reading in the library the single time we'd actually spoken, but I just couldn't.

Caleb nodded. A slight smile hovered so fleetingly I didn't know if it was real before he blinked and looked away.

Lost again, I shoved through the crowd—and fear of being rejected by the one person who knew the truth made me sick to my stomach.

Calculus. *Cal-cu-lus.*

The bell clanged and kids dashed for the doorways. Mr. Clarke's class was on the right, stuffy and as silent as the grave. I was pissed when I walked through the door. Pissed that I'd worn a short-sleeved shirt when the forecast called for snow, and pissed that my body betrayed me and I was still, despite my promises, hard as a plank. I took a seat against the far window where the radiator expanded with a steady tick. I organized my thoughts, my papers, found a mechanical pencil, and I got to work.

Chapter Three

“Someone could have warned me,” I mumbled to my worthless brother as I followed him to the attic bedroom.

“Well, if we had *cell service* in upper numb-fuck Vermont, I would have. I don’t think anyone knew who he was until half an hour ago when Mom announced you’d had a crush on him in high school.”

“I didn’t mean that—although it would have been unusually thoughtful of you to call. I meant about Dad.” My God, the stair railing was festooned with so much garland, bows, sprigs of weathered juniper and Christmas balls, there was no place to put my hand. I hefted my bag higher and let Jake pass. He thumped up the stairs as if he’d been here before. “When were you going to tell me he was sick?”

“I just found out today. They didn’t want us to worry because the test results aren’t in—but be warned, he’s a little fuzzy.”

Fuzzy. “You mean like last time.”

“I don’t know. Mom hasn’t said. But he’s seventy-six years old.”

“I know that.” After the chemo and a round of radiation treatments fifteen years ago, it wasn’t likely they’d put him through another. I swallowed past the fear and tried to be practical. “He’s seen his oncologist?”

“Yesterday.” Ryan nodded and knocked my bag into the wall. Something clanked.

“Could you please be careful?”

“Sorry. That’s all the information I have. He went for a bunch of tests and we need to just wait and see. We’re going to have a good Christmas for Dad and hope to hell he’s just not getting enough B12. That’s the deal. We need to make this count. We’re going to have a good time.”

“I just know too much about what can go wrong.” All of it was at the forefront of my mind—but my brother was right. There was nothing we could do today except make this Christmas a good one.

“We’ll have fun,” he said and then he grinned over his shoulder. “With Caleb Black. Holy crap. The look on your face was priceless.”

I hit him with my bag as we trudged up the last narrow staircase. More garlands and frippery choked the hall until eventually, under a row of wooden nutcrackers grinning toothily from a shelf above the stairwell, we arrived in the attic. “Could your room be any farther from the front door?”

“I’m that much closer to heaven.” As promised, Doug Winters had saddled me with the yellow room, one of a pair of rooms that inconveniently shared a tiny bathroom. I felt increasingly like an afterthought.

Jake trotted happily into the room and located a cozy spot on the braided hearthrug. He circled and within moments snored peacefully by the sizzling gas fire.

It took my brother and I a little longer to come to terms with the décor. Practicality won over, and I slogged into the room and tossed my bag onto the bed. It sank under an ocean of decorative pillows.

Ryan’s thrilled giggle grated on my nerves as it had for thirty-one years.

“Hey. Look at this.” He yanked the outside door wide and a blast of icy air swept in. Snow flaked the carpet. “There’s a gallery.”

A sturdy balcony straight out of *Romeo and Juliet* connected my room with the one next door. “Bloody cold out here.” Ryan shut and locked the door. “I guess that’s the fire escape. You just fall into the snow bank below if you catch on fire. No big deal.”

“Is your room like this?”

“No. It’s much, much worse. I’ll give you five minutes to do whatever—changing your pants would be prime. No one under fifty wears corduroy, bro. And then, if you’re nice, I’ll buy you a scotch.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my pants. They’re warm.”

“They add five pounds.”

I frowned as he shut the door behind him and I shucked my cords. They were perfectly serviceable pants. He was full of shit. I hadn’t gained a pound since ... last year.

I collapsed in the nest of pillows and pondered the flower-strewn canopy of eyelet and cabbage-sized yellow roses. This was a girl’s room. A *little* girl’s room. Dolls sat stiff-legged on the mantel, their shod feet poking from frilly dresses. It was kind of funny, really. There were crocheted runners covering all the furniture. This could be Doug Winters’s passive aggressive statement about my sexuality, but I suspected all the rooms bore the same homey stamp.

The bed was comfortable, so I closed my eyes. My father’s thin face stared back at me, but it was Caleb’s voice that filled my mind.

“Hey. Is that your father?” I nudged Caleb and he glanced away from his book.

“Where?”

“Pulling in.” A U-Haul rocked onto the dirt driveway. Two houses away from the shoddy place Caleb rented with his father, we sat keeping warm in my shit-box Dodge Colt. The engine ran and heat blew weakly through the vent.

“This was a mistake. I have to go.” Caleb flung the door wide and the icy air blasted in. He pocketed the dog-eared paperback he’d borrowed from me and said, “I’m sorry, Owen.”

“Go? Where?”

“I’ll try to call you, okay? Happy New Year, man.” He smiled, that crooked tip of lip, and had I any inkling that this was it—that I’d never see him again—I’d have pulled him by the collar of his corduroy coat right back into the car and made him tell me what the hell was going on. Instead I nodded, and like a fool, I let him go.

“Later, O.”

A rap of knuckles interrupted my snooze and I opened my eyes to a cloud of eyelet and lace. I must have been dreaming, because it wasn't Caleb Black knocking on my door to wish me a Merry Christmas. “Owen. Open the door, hon. It's Mom.”

I wouldn't acknowledge my disappointment, but it acknowledged me as I hefted myself from the bed. I blinked at my watch. I'd lost a half hour.

“Owen?”

“Yeah. I know who it is.”

Jake lifted his head from the carpet and wagged his tail as I let her in.

“Oh. Isn't this charming?” She took in the lace and the dolls and then she coughed into her hand in a sorry attempt to cover a laugh. “I'm so sorry. This is dreadful. I wonder if they had a daughter?”

“I'd take that bet.”

“Our room has a sunflower motif. It's a bit startling. Now, enough moping. Come downstairs.”

“I'm not moping. I fell asleep.”

“Well, your eighty-year-old uncles traveled from Pittsburg by train and bus and then car to be here and they are downstairs socializing and relieving your father of his fortune, those little card sharks. Quit feeling sorry for yourself, wash your face and get your butt down there. Do you understand? This is important. It's Christmas.”

It was useless to argue. “I just needed to change my pants.”

“Oh thank goodness. Those were dreadful.” She stared at my shirt now and raised her eyebrow. “Are you going to finish?”

“Finish what?” I slid my shearling slippers on. “Slippers are fine for inside?”

Mom sighed. “Yes. He’s very handsome, isn’t he?”

“Who?”

“Please.”

“Mom. Do not under any circumstances at all butt in here. You gave me your word.”

“Fine. Let’s have a cocktail with your father. Otherwise all bets are off and mark my words, I will interfere. I’ll tell him this was all your idea.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Are you threatening me?”

“Of course I am. I’m your mother. And I want this Christmas to be wonderful.”

“They’re all wonderful. That’s sort of the hallmark of Christmas. And it comes but once a year.”

“I know, but your father’s been under-the-weather.” Before I could respond, she held up a hand. “I don’t want to discuss this. He’s just having some problems with his iron. That’s all.”

“Mom. You can’t hide his illness indefinitely.”

“I can, until he wants you to know. That’s his prerogative. Right now, he wants to have a Merry Christmas—and save the decisions and the discussion for next week. There’s nothing we can do until then anyway.” My mother’s voice was firm enough that I didn’t argue. “No calling your colleagues in Boston either.”

“I’m a vet, not an oncologist.”

“You’re a determined man who doesn’t like the word *no*. You never have.”

“Fine. Agreed.” She knew me so well. “No calls.”

“Owen, he’s not getting any younger. I know you don’t want to hear it, but he’ll never be as fit as he was. We’re going to enjoy the holiday. Okay?”

I nodded and she slipped her lean, strong arms around me and hugged me tight.

“I just love when we’re all together like this—even when you’re cranky.”

“I’m not cranky,” I grumbled.

“Of course not.”

She squeezed me again and I couldn’t remember the last time anyone had put their arms around me or even touched me. Probably not since Thanksgiving. She’d packaged the leftovers and as we stood in the driveway of my childhood home, she’d hugged me good-bye.

“I know I’m a pain, but you and Ryan need to settle down now. It’s time. You need someone to love who will love you back. I worry that you’re alone.”

“I’m not alone. I have Jake.”

Jake’s tail thumped the carpet.

“And he’s a very good dog. But he’s a dog.” She scratched his ear. “C’mon. Let’s go. Shake a tail feather.” She said this as if the opportunity to find true love was waiting just down the stairs and if I didn’t hurry, I’d miss it. Jake waited by the door, eager to do his evening thing, so we both plodded down the stairs after my talkative mother.

We were nearly to the entry when the desk bell rang. *Ding ding ding.*

Mom stopped midstair and, peering over the banister, I could have sworn she said *shit* under her breath.

Doug Winters’s hearty voice called, “*Welcome!*” as he burst through the doorway. He was as jolly as Santa Claus, without the *ho ho ho*. “Our last guest to arrive. Isn’t this a hoot? He’s from Boston too.”

I shouldn’t have looked.

Keith Turner stood in the entry, his shoulders dusted in snowflakes. An

overnight bag lay on the floor beside him. Hoot? No. It wasn't a hoot. I squeezed my eyes hoping he and his luggage would disappear, but it wasn't going to be that easy to lose him. He lingered expectantly by the door and I knew my mother's *real* matchmaking plan had arrived in the flesh.

Shit, indeed.

I turned my suspicious glare on my mother and said through clenched teeth, "What were you thinking?"

"I swear I thought it was a good idea at the time. I mentioned it months ago in passing and he never RSVP'd. I would have dissuaded him. *Really*. Who doesn't at least phone ahead?"

We stopped hissing and whispering when it became apparent we had a rapt audience.

"Hey there." Keith's failed attempt to pretend he hadn't heard us brought a sheepish smile to his face and it made him more handsome. I hardened myself. He was in the past, my fatter past, and he, my ennui and ten pounds were staying there. I was having a fresh start. "Merry Christmas, Owen. Patricia."

I hoped to hell he didn't have the connecting room to mine.

Doug Winters saved me. "Mr. Turner, I've put you in the rose bedroom. It's small, but it's convenient to the lobby."

Relief that Keith had a shitty room on the ground floor was short-lived because voices filled the hallway.

"Is dinner ready yet?" Ryan entered looking rumpled and sly and slightly loose-limbed. He held a drink in his hand and he groaned when he saw me. "What the hell are you wearing? You look like a lumberjack."

"It's a red and green shirt. They're the colors of the season." I took a look around and realized I blended in to the décor. Ryan had some sort of expensive black silky button-down shirt and black pants combination that seemed gayer than anything in my sartorial experience, but it wasn't in my best interest to point that out.

Caleb and his lady friend passed under the heirloom Victorian Christmas ball hanging from the arched doorway. They each held steaming mugs of something—wassail no doubt—and stopped to meet the new guest.

Keith smiled, and with only five feet separating him from Caleb, the ebony hair, the green eyes and slim build, it all made an embarrassing kind of sense. Because my latest ex? He was the knock-off version of the original.

I had a type, and now everyone in the entryway knew it, including me. I was suddenly very glad to be blending in to the wallpaper. I grumbled for my mother's ears only, "Is it any wonder I prefer the company of dogs to people?"

"They can't make you coffee," Mom snapped before turning her stage smile on Keith.

"Well, isn't this a pleasant surprise."

"Well, no, not really. You invited—"

"Yes. How lovely that you thought to surprise us. RSVP is so passé. You look dashing as always, is that Burberry?" I gave her some credit for not looking once between the two men.

Ryan didn't spare me for a second as he enacted a dramatic double take. "That certainly clears a few things up for me."

Keith showed my mother his nifty bag. "Yes, I just bought it yesterday."

My brother placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. He said quietly, "I swear to you, I didn't know he was coming. I would have stopped her—or at least warned you."

"Which is why I believe you. I have to wonder if she suspected."

"Probably since day one. Seriously, O. He's the spitting image."

Keith kissed my mother's cheek, and I took a prudent step backward before he decided to kiss me, as well. Caleb stared at my former lover like he recognized him from somewhere. A mirror, perhaps. I may as well have been invisible for

all the notice Caleb gave me.

“Nice to see you.” Keith offered my brother a hand like he might not get it back.

“Unavoidable. We’re in the trenches now, mate. Time to hunker down and see this through. Man up and do our duty.” Ryan was smashed, but he was absolutely right. We were just going to have to make the best of this.

“Sure,” Keith said.

Mom narrowed her eyes at Ryan, but her voice for Keith was hospitable. “How was the trip?”

“It was long. I’m surprised at how far this place is from Boston. You’ve gone so far.” He shouldered his pricy luggage, and waited for me to explain my decision to move so close to the Canadian border. I was fresh out of explanations. I hadn’t uttered a word to him in six months.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

My mother blanched and Keith blinked. “I was invited. I wanted to see the new practice. I...I come in peace. Truly.”

My mother stepped in and saw to the social niceties since that was clearly beyond me. “This is May, she’s a local girl who teaches ceramics at St. James’—and this is Caleb.” Mom paused for dramatic effect. “He’s an old friend of Owen’s.”

I kept my eyes steady on the desk bell but I know I flushed.

“Caleb Black. Such a pleasant surprise to run into him here of all places.” No one dared to contradict her. “And he’s a teacher. You two have so much in common.”

Keith gave my mother a curious look. “I’m in sales and marketing.”

“Yes. Well...I’m sure you have other things in common.”

“Like doing my brother,” Ryan whispered in my ear. “Awk-ward.”

“Teacher?” I peered at Caleb in confusion as he quietly drank his wassail. “I... I thought you were a pianist.” As if that made a lick of difference.

“I’m a lot of things. I teach now.”

“Because those who can’t *do*, teach. Am I right or am I right?” Ryan snorted.

My mother put her hand over her face for just a second.

“Well. Congratulations.” That was all I had.

Jake grunted impatiently by the door, providing me with an escape route. He scratched his ear slowly and then sat on his butt, stuffed his back foot in his mouth and waited.

Mom elbowed me and I wanted to elbow her back when she said, “Owen’s a vet.”

“So I understand.”

He must think...

What the hell do I care what he thinks?

The man hadn’t so much as nodded hello to me since I’d arrived. He wouldn’t make eye contact, never mind shake my hand. Maybe he *didn’t* remember me and was just putting up a front for my conniving mother.

Nobody said anything as the clock marked the passing seconds like a gong. Doug Winters, bless his innkeeper’s heart, took pity on us. “The rose room is back here. I’m sure you’ll find it comfortable.” I imagined a bed choked with thorns. “If you’ll just follow me?”

“Well, I should probably get settled before dinner,” Keith said and no one contradicted him.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Ryan rang the desk bell. “We have a winner.

Thanks, Mom, for another excruciating moment.”

“I just thought it would be nice to invite him. He’s not a bad man. And he’s all alone.”

“As I recall, that was his choice.” Ryan’s smile was soft, but his words were sharp. He turned to me. “Bro, you can do better.”

“I take it he’s not welcome?” the woman—May—asked.

“I invited him in August, for pity’s sake. I miscalculated.”

“I’ll ask him to leave,” I said.

“Owen. It’s *Christmas*.”

“I’m aware.” I grabbed my coat and snapped the front door wide, desperate for an escape route. Caleb Black’s stare followed me—I felt it as the sleigh bells jingled and I fled to the porch in my sheepskin slippers. Snowflakes swirled in the lamp light and the wind kicked violently from the north and howled over the fields. A frosty tidal wave of white whipped across the lawn as I descended into the night to let Jake piss on the unspoiled snow.

Chapter Four

At seven-thirty dinner arrived on a little wheeled trolley. Doug Winters steered a savory pineapple-encrusted ham into the candlelit dining room and my father and his brothers followed the scent of cured meat and maple.

Advent carols played on the sound system and my mother hummed innocently beside another towering Christmas tree, this one a Douglas fir laden with twinkle lights and tinsel. Mom was the brightest spot in the room in a cheerful reindeer sweater upon which Rudolph's nose flashed red light.

I poured a drink and circled the ornately dressed table, squinting at the place cards. Keith had the place next to my mother. My name rested suspiciously beside Caleb's. May was next to Ryan.

No question someone had rearranged the seating plan to her satisfaction.

"Man, you've aged well." Ryan shook his cocktail at Caleb as they took their seats. He wasn't the only McKenzie hitting the holiday sauce with gusto. I sucked a scotch-flavored ice cube as Ryan's blue eyes sparkled. He was feeling frisky. "Isn't this a small world? I still can't believe it. *Caleb Black*, mister high-school enigma himself."

"I wasn't an enigma." Caleb smoothed his napkin over his lap. "I was just another kid."

"And you still look like one. You haven't changed a bit. Except you traded your grunge wear for cashmere." He'd changed for dinner. His sweater was the same green as his eyes.

"What's your secret? Clean living and fresh air? Or dirty sex?"

"He's taller," I offered and they both turned to stare at me as if I'd farted in public.

"What? It's true. You *are* taller."

I used to have to bend to kiss him. The tips of my ears burned and I reached for my glass.

Caleb cleared his throat and set his own drink down. "I had a late growth spurt in college. Other than that?" He smiled at Ryan. "Yes to all of the above."

"I'll drink to that."

"You'll drink to anything tonight," I muttered.

Doug Winters lapped the table filling wine glasses and making small talk. There was a shout of laughter from the other end of the table and then, dinner was served.

May sat across from me and she sent a friendly smile my way. "If it's any consolation to you, my family lives to embarrass me at every holiday. It's excruciating. We can talk about something else at this end of the table, if you like." She didn't once notice my brother and he frowned a little at her as if she were going to spoil all his fun. Her bright eyes were filled with mischievousness and I found myself eased by her presence. "We'll be the grown-ups."

"That would be a welcome change." She was very pretty, I realized. Not at first glance, but she was cute and curvy and in her green velvet dress, with her hair flowing to her waist, she looked like a voluptuously sexy Christmas elf.

Ryan couldn't keep his eyes off her.

"So, your mother tells me that you're a vet, Dr. McKenzie." May passed the bread to Ryan without looking at him.

"It's Owen, please. I hope she didn't talk your ear off."

"Oh no, not at all. She's quite proud of you."

"I am," Mom called from the end of the table.

Caleb handed me the bread. "I'm not surprised you've done well. I always admired your focus."

So he *did* remember me, but only for my GPA? “Well, once I knew what I wanted, I didn’t let anything stand in my way.”

“I remember.”

What did he remember?

But he didn’t choose to elaborate. Instead he served himself a slab of ham, his part of the conversation apparently over, and tucked in to his dinner. His hands were graceful, and his manners would make my mother proud. Which was to say, he knew which fork to use.

It bothered me.

“I understand you’re opening a practice in St. James.” May lifted her wine glass. “A toast, then, to Owen and new beginnings.”

“New beginnings.” I touched my glass to hers and everyone at the table followed suit. I moved to steer the conversation. “So, tell me about—”

Ryan’s voice drowned mine as he honed in on Caleb. “So, what brings you to Evergreen?”

“We were invited.”

“Oh. Are you two a couple?” Ryan waggled his eyebrows. “Lucky you.”

“Put your eyes back in your head.” May handled my brother like a pro. “We’re just old friends.”

“I promised we’d spend Christmas here. We teach together at the college.” Caleb tossed that information out and I inhaled my Merlot. *Holy hell, it burned.* I blinked through a sheen of cough-induced tears as wine flooded my sinuses.

“I didn’t realize.” I wheezed. “When you said teacher, I thought...I thought you meant kindergarten.” I wiped my nose with my napkin.

“No way.” May giggled and then she laughed full out. “No.”

“You teach...here? In St. James? At the college?”

How could that be?

He nodded. “Going on five years now.”

Obviously this wasn’t news to my brother who winked at me. That grinning bastard.

“Wow. Talk about a small world. What do you think, Owen? Isn’t that uncanny?”

“I...yes.” I scrambled to say something coherent. “What a fluke.”

Fluke?

“I live in town as well.” Caleb speared a baby potato with his fork and I felt its tines jab me straight in my solar plexus.

“Excuse me?” My own fork hit my plate with a clatter.

“Actually, I guess I should welcome you to St. James.” Caleb lifted his glass again. His smile flashed in the candlelight. He was handsome and smooth and I felt like a bumbling oaf.

“Welcome, new neighbor.”

He didn’t even blink.

“Small, small world.” Ryan tapped his glass to May’s.

“Welcome, Owen!” My mother raised her glass. “And to old friends and new friends.”

“Here, here!” Uncle Duncan lifted his wobbling goblet and I held my breath. Wine sloshed but he managed to tap his glass against my father’s without incident. They all looked so happy. I raised my glass and my father’s twinkling blue eyes winked back at me.

Keith dabbed his lip with his napkin and cleared his throat, finally breaking his

silence. “So. Caleb, is it? Tell me again what it is that you teach.”

“Creative writing, Lit, English 101, Women and Speculative Fiction. You know, the usual.”

That made so much sense. “I never saw you without a book in your hand. Fantasy books.” Some of them were mine. “You read all the time.”

“It’s my passion. And I’m hopelessly addicted to anything with magic, wizards or swords.”

Keith scoffed, “Like *Lord of the Rings*?”

“Exactly. Owen bought me the set back when we were in high school.” He said to me, “I don’t know if you remember that.”

He remembers. Warmth spread through my body, but that had to be the wine. “For Christmas.”

“Read to me.” Caleb shoved his hair back from his forehead and it poked like the spines of a hedgehog—if hedgehog spines were blue. Latching on to my wrist, he yanked and I fell on top of him. He smelled like the garage where he worked, and my mother’s gingerbread cookies. His mouth closed on the side of my neck. “Mmm...”

“Bite me.”

He squirmed against me and laughed. “I will. But first—read.”

“You’re crazy.” Teeth nibbled along my shoulder and I rolled him onto his back, and pinned him. I gripped his wrist against my pillow and he struggled only because I loved it. Sex. I was going to have sex again with another person. With Caleb Black.

“When you read, it’s even better. I could listen to your voice forever.” His free hand slid into my underwear and my dick fit perfectly into his curved fingers. He whispered, “I promise to make it worth your while ...”

“Anything.”

May's voice brought me back. "Caleb's being modest. He's the new assistant chair of the department."

I put the wine down and reached for my water.

"Must be a small school," Keith said.

My mother cooed, "Oh, that's wonderful. And it's another reason to celebrate. Congratulations, Caleb! Your parents must be so proud."

"Thank you, Mrs. McKenzie. I'd like to think so. My mother was a teacher and read to me until I was in the seventh grade. She passed away when I was in high school."

I turned to look at him. "I didn't know that."

At eighteen I'd been perilously close to losing a parent. I glanced again at my father.

"I know. I should have said something—I was going to say something." Caleb pushed his hair back, the first self-conscious move I'd seen from him since he dropped the sheet music two hours earlier. "But things got in the way. And then there wasn't time."

From her spot on the opposite end of the table, Mom said, "I remember the first time you came to our house. It was the winter break of Owen's senior year. You had blue hair and the two of you blushed the entire time."

"Mom, I don't think anyone wants to hear..."

"Blue hair?" Keith laughed. "That's so extreme."

"Extremely *cool*. Chicks dug it. And evidently our Owen did too." Ryan looked between Caleb and I. "I never saw you at the house. Where the hell was I?"

"Molesting the sophomore class."

May giggled. She must think I was joking.

“Those two were an item,” my mother announced. “Caleb was Owen’s first boyfriend.”

Truly, if Father Christmas loved me at all, he would gift my mother with acute laryngitis.

“*What?*” Keith’s aggrieved voice pinged through the room. “I thought you didn’t come out until college. I thought your first lover was that Terence guy in your anatomy class.”

“Yes, Owen. Tell us about *Terence*.” Ryan flinched as May kicked him under the table.

“Hey. That hurt.”

“There’s a difference between *coming out* and *making out*. I think everyone understands that point.”

“Yes of course there is, but I don’t think you ever mentioned this.” Keith eyed Caleb.

“You never mentioned anyone with blue hair.”

“Maybe you just weren’t listening,” Ryan offered helpfully.

My mother continued dreamily, “It was snowing and I had just banned Tchaikovsky for the season. Dad was sleeping. I was standing by the kitchen window frosting cookies and the Vienna Boys’ Choir were revved up to sing Handel’s *Messiah*—”

Doug Winters circled the table again and unnecessarily replenished the wine as Mom geared to tell her spellbound audience a story. *My* story. If I could crawl under the table, I would, but that would only encourage her.

“—when Owen came home from the winter dance with a boy in a red sports car...a Mustang.”

“It was a Mach One. I loved that car,” Caleb added.

“They parked on the street. Snowflakes covered the car windows, but I saw

you both silhouetted in the lamp light.”

“Oh for the love of...”

“The two of you stayed there, parked in front of the house in the freezing cold. The windows fogged. Time passed.” My mother’s career on the stage had been wasted in the ballet.

“It was nearly midnight when you finally brought him into the house...he had a twig of mistletoe tucked into his jacket and I knew. He was your first.”

The sound of metal rasping against china filled the room as Keith sawed into his meat. Ryan gave my mother an appalled look. “You didn’t actually witness this event, did you?”

“Don’t be disgusting.” She sipped her wine. She should eat some ham. Maybe soak up some of that alcohol. “Not that you are disgusting, love, but I respect your privacy.”

Ten years of education, a new veterinary practice, and she could level me with ease. As an adult I knew better, but shock had a way of sailing past reason and leaving a person floundering in adolescent embarrassment. I’d thought I was too old for this. Man, had I thought wrong.

My face had to be as bright as Rudolph’s red nose flashing on her sweater. “How can you remember a single inconsequential event that happened fifteen years ago?”

“Inconsequential? Don’t dishonor your history or insult the man sitting beside you. He was your first love. And you—” she waved her glass at Caleb, “—you thought my son hung the moon. I saw you.”

What had she seen? Caleb’s palm had cupped my neck and I could still hear the sound of my throat clicking in the silence of the car as I swallowed. It was steamy inside, but that ring on his knuckle was cool against my skin as he drew me in for another kiss. Jesus. I’d nearly self-combusted. A short time later the two of us were sequestered in my bedroom, the walls plastered in posters of snowboarders and football greats, and Caleb coaxed his way inside my jeans. When his wet mouth closed around the velvet tip of my penis, I had utterly

combusted.

Don't look at him.

But I did—and to my amazement, Caleb looked back at me. His voice was soft. “I remember that as well, Mrs. McKenzie.”

Against his pale hair the tips of his ears glowed a bright scarlet. His simple reaction stayed me from gagging my mother, who said, “It was a defining moment.”

She was right. That evening held the definitive moment of a lifetime because it was the first time I came in another man's mouth—it had been the official point of no return.

That memory was clearly written in Caleb's expression as his gaze searched mine. I didn't move. His bayberry aftershave held me prisoner. And his chin was so smooth I knew he'd shaved before dinner. I waited, spellbound, as Caleb's glance flitted to my lips for a hovering nanosecond. Right there in the dining room, in front of the entire McKenzie clan, with a single look, Caleb caught me.

He licked his lips and I couldn't have moved if my life depended on it.

From a seemingly great distance my mom said, “That's when I knew I had a gay son. You were *parking* with a *boy*—and he was so unbelievably adorable. Dreamy.”

“But you never said a thing about him. Nothing.” Keith's voice was filled with confusion and, thank God, because he broke the spell I was under. I flushed like a schoolboy and stared down at the puddle of gravy on my plate. I'd eaten every last scrap. When had that happened? No wonder my stomach felt strange. Keith's silverware clanked as he set them on his plate. “Who in the hell *are* you?”

“What does it matter to you?” Another sentence I wanted to retract instantly.

“I'm Caleb Black. I was only in Owen and Ryan's school for half a year.” Caleb shrugged. “Maybe I wasn't worth talking about.”

He couldn't possibly believe that—although my every word tonight proved otherwise. I'd just called him *inconsequential*.

Nice work, you moron.

"It's okay. I understand. I was a handful," he said and my stomach burned with shame. I couldn't have this conversation with him. Not here. Not with Keith's eyes gleaming demonically from five chairs away—what the hell was he doing here? Not with my mother hovering on every word and certainly not with my father blinking in confusion at the lot of us.

I reached for my glass.

May's eyes twinkled as she ably steered the conversation. "Caleb's still pretty dreamy, though. You've got that right, Mrs. McKenzie. I bet Mr. McKenzie really cut a wide swath back in the day, too." Ryan groaned, but if he wasn't smart enough to run away with that girl, I would. She was unexpectedly clever—and a true lifesaver. "Now. Tell me the story of how you met—and then we can have some pie and coffee."

Chapter Five

I was back in Boston. Fat flakes whitewashed Newbury Street and the air was sweet with the scent of falling snow. Taillights moved through the intersection a block away and the T crawled on its elevated track with a tinny *clackety-clack*—which was impossible. There hadn't ever been an elevated train here before, but since this was a dream, I let it go.

Half a block ahead of me, a man left fresh boot tracks in the unspoiled snow. He huddled deep inside his coat as white blanketed his shoulders. With his collar turned high and his hands shoved in his coat pockets, he hunched against the weather and moved purposefully away.

"Hey," I called, but he disappeared into an alley. I followed him into the narrow shadows. Snowfall accumulated on the walks and ledges around me with a soft hiss. Traffic sloshed in some far-off street and the light of the train faded into an arched tunnel made of tree limbs.

I squinted.

An unlikely forest had cropped up around me. It was weird. Trees winked into existence where before there were only street lamps and signposts. A breeze swirled and the buildings shifted, morphing from charming Bostonian buildings to the towering forest road of Evergreen. Even the pines creaked in the wind.

"Caleb?" His footprints meandered through the blue-white ground. Amorphous blobs—garbage bins, an abandoned shopping cart, a piano, my first car—littered the path, but I followed him until the trail winded ahead and his marks faded around a bend. I was alone.

Something yanked me by the scruff of my collar and I stumbled backward into an unseen doorway—or inside a tree. I couldn't tell which, but the smell of liquor and Quaker State motor oil filled my frozen nostrils and I knew. I knew him. I'd always known him. Even his smell was the same.

"I thought I'd find you here." The same words he'd spoken when he found me standing outside the gym. When most sane people were making out under that

depressing mistletoe ball or holding hands in public with their heart's desire at that outdated holiday dance, I'd been a solitary figure lurking in the shadows, outside peering in. I'd stood fogging the glass, feeling as if I'd never belong anywhere—because I'd never be brave enough to kiss my true love under the mistletoe.

And just as he'd surprised me when we were teenagers, the shock of his cold fingertip on my skin heated me from within. I wasn't alone anymore, not with Caleb's hand sliding over my jaw. His palm scraped my whiskered chin like sandpaper.

I grabbed his wrist, not to budge him, but to keep him before he faded into my memory. I pressed into his cupped hand and he leaned against me. "Owen McKenzie, funny how I see you everywhere I go."

"I'm hard to miss." My name from his lips sent a wave of longing through my stomach until his words suddenly penetrated. He'd seen me?

Where?

"No. That's not what I mean. I've seen you watching me. All the time. You can't take your eyes off me." Breath tickled my ear as if he found my crush endearing, or curious, or, oh God please, maybe mutual. We huddled together out of the wind and snow—my shoulders met the wall and our hips connected in painful perfection.

"We talked in the library that day. Remember?"

"I remember." He moved, pulling something from his jacket pocket and I flinched. I had no idea why—but all he had in his hand was a tiny, silly sprig of mistletoe. "Look what I stole from the dance. Right off the top."

"You're crazy."

"I must be to think you were waiting for me." His fingertip brushed the corner of my mouth. I wanted to touch my tongue to his salty finger and suck him inside, but I was too frozen with fear to follow through.

"What...what are you doing?"

His breath fluttered on my lips. “What do you think I’m doing?”

Jesus. It was all exactly the same. Every bit of it. I tried to shrug him off, but my cock hardened against his fly. “I...I don’t know.”

“Liar. You do know and you want this as much as I do.” That fingertip stroked a line of fire from the corner of my mouth to my chin, and then his hand gripped my nape, sliding until he held me in the palm of one hand. “Don’t you, Owen?”

I swallowed.

Our coat buttons clicked together and it was the first time in my life that the bulge of another man’s groin magically hardened against my own erection. His lips hovered over my neck. “Do I make you nervous?”

“No.” *Yes. Fuck, yes.*

“Don’t be. It’ll be good.”

Jesus, he was a teenage Don Juan. He held that tiny twig right over my head and my skin grew unspeakably hot. His lips met my jaw, feathering across my skin as somehow our clothes, layer after layer, dissolved. We were naked, sealed to each other in the alley or forest or gym or wherever the hell we were. Time didn’t matter. This was my dream and I wanted to finally, finally play it out. For him to open my body, and put himself inside me.

The snow was gone. The heat of Caleb’s body had melted it all. He was firm and smooth and unlike me, his chest was free of hair. His nipples were pebbled points that rubbed, his cock a torch that burned. After a lifetime of longing, I was desperate. I needed him. I wanted him. I wanted his hands opening my thighs, his mouth trailing my chest, his cock quickening inside my hole—I wanted it all. So I slid my palms around his flank. I cupped the sweetly curved cheeks of his ass and curled around his body, sheltering him.

Stark light hit his face. Even here in the dark of my dreams, light sought him, and he blinked, slow and deliberately. Thick, sooty lashes spiked on his cheek and Caleb’s weirdly pale eyes opened and he stared with hunger at my mouth.

“Just fucking kiss me already.”

“I will.” He teased the edge of my lip and lust forced my cock to kiss his. Hair rubbed into my groin. My skin burned under his gaze and I licked my lip. “Let me do that for you.” And goddamn if his mouth didn’t at last meet mine. “Open up, Owen.”

I did—wishing for the sugary, bubble-gum flavor from years ago. Touching my tongue to his, he was every bit as succulent as I remembered—sticky candy sweet.

“Open up, Owen.”

I groaned, “I am.” I opened and opened and willed him to fuck me. I begged him to do it. I rubbed myself against him, humping into the illusion of Caleb as some asshole knocked on the tree trunk. *So close. So fucking close.* Branches groaned from far away. They nipped from existence with a *knock-knock*.

“Owen. *Open up. Open the fucking door.*”

I blinked awake.

Above me a canopy of eerie twinkling lights was strewn like a blanket of fading stars—it was the soft fire glow shining through eyelet and lace.

“O-Owen?”

I stared at the door, but the knocking came from outside.

“Shit. C-can you open the f-fucking door—I’m l-locked out.”

I was in Vermont, in the yellow cabbage-rose room. It was Christmas. I was with family. It was late. Caleb Black had conveniently taken the room next to mine and my hand was stroking my dick.

Bang bang bang.

“O-Owe-n?” His voice came from the porch and it sounded borderline desperate. His teeth chattered through the door.

“Coming.” Or nearly so. *Holy hell.* I tossed the pillow wedged between my

thighs, and flung the cloud of eyelet covers away. It was snowing tonight and the wind howled over the mountains—a Canadian blast that swept straight from the North Pole. The temperature was a scant four degrees. “Yeah. Hold on.”

What the hell was he doing outside? I found my underwear on the chair and then flipped the porch light. Caleb’s white face appeared ghostlike in the window as he watched me drag a pair of boxers over my swollen privates.

He’d seen me jerking off in my sleep. I mean, seriously, it didn’t get worse than that, did it?

I flipped the lock and the wind smacked the door wide. Jake whined at the sudden cold air. A sheet of snow slid from the ledge above us. It fell directly on Caleb’s head but he seemed too frozen to shake it off. His hands were stuffed in his pockets; his head was bare. He wore a somber black wool coat with round buttons the size of half-dollars and a full collar hiked to his ears. A pea coat. His pajama pants were stiff white cotton covered with tiny blue anchors.

“What the hell are you doing out there? You’re freezing.” I dragged him by the lapel into the room and was shocked by the chill of his bare skin.

“I-I am. Je-Jesus you sleep like the d-dead.” Another gust of bracing air followed him as he stumbled into my warm room and I kicked shut the door.

“F-fuck it’s c-cold.”

“Yeah, well it’s December in Vermont and...where do you think you’re going?”

“D-down to get the k-key.” He moved toward the hall with all the grace of Frankenstein.

“I’ll call down. Don’t be an idiot—go warm up.”

Caleb veered directly to the fireplace. He stuck his bare hands toward the heat, moving close enough to crawl inside. Jake sat up to watch him. “Th-thanks. It’s fu-fucking cold.”

“You said that. How long were you out there?” He was borderline hypothermic

and I was so stymied that he was actually here in my bedroom, I was having difficulty reacting.

“I d-don’t know. Thirty m-minutes?”

Shit. He’d watched me playing with myself for half an hour. There wasn’t time to be embarrassed, though, because the wind chill had to be minus twenty. “You banged on the door the whole time?”

“There aren’t a-any s-stairs.”

Ryan was right—what a shitty design—and actually, that couldn’t be legal. Where was the fire escape? And what was he doing outside? I stomped to the fireplace. “Take anything off that’s wet or frozen.”

He nodded but his long fingers were currently stick-stiff and he couldn’t slide a single button free. I’d have to do that for him. Could this night get any weirder? “Move.” I pushed his hands away and worked to peel his coat off. Underneath he wore a thin blue T-shirt with the St. James logo. “Sit.”

Jake looked at me, but Caleb was the one who obeyed by sinking onto the foot of the bed. “Not even a sweater or a hat? Nothing? What the hell is wrong with you?”

My bedside manner could use a little work.

“The d-door c-closed and I think my k-key is on the table. I didn’t know th-the door would lock-k.” I shucked his shoes and socks, my relief immediate that his feet were dry. Cool, but dry.

“Wiggle your toes.” He did and that was one less thing to worry about. White patches on his cheeks contrasted against his pinkish skin, but that would fade. “Lift up, I need to take your pants off.”

He finally reacted. Popsicle-cold as he was, his glance still strayed to my crotch. “Uh...I don’t know...”

“Off. Don’t be an idiot.” I was stripping him whether he agreed or not. This wasn’t sexual, it was practical.

Caleb lifted. He didn't look away as I slid his sailor pants down over his knees. He tumbled back—

—onto my bed, his slim thighs so long I didn't know where to put my hands first. He was here, he was hard, and he was in my bed. Buffalo Tom drowned the sound of my heavy breathing as I all but salivated on his beautiful skin, but I tossed him the bag from the bookstore instead. I was so bloody nervous. What if he didn't like it? What if it was a stupid idea? I'd never given a present to a... whatever he was. A boyfriend. My boyfriend. "Merry Christmas," I said sheepishly.

"Seriously?" He dumped the books onto the bed, and then he shoved his hair back and stared at the bounty covering the sheets. His smile was so intensely needy, my heart flipped over.

"You got them all? I love it, Owen. I love you."

Caleb jettisoned back to sitting and I shook myself. "Can I have the b-blanket?" He shivered in his plain boxer briefs and T-shirt.

I threw the blanket over him and thumped to the phone. *What the hell was wrong with me?* I dialed Winters, who answered on the fourth ring. "Can you bring some hot milk to my room, and some whiskey? And bring Mr. Black's key, please. He's locked out." I set the phone down with a clatter and raked my hair with my fingers, desperate to get a handle on my wayward thoughts.

But Caleb Black was in my bed.

"Are you trying to k-kill me? That sounds v-vile."

"The milk? When he gets here, you drink it. It'll bring your core temperature up."

"Sure, Doc. B-but the whiskey sounds b-better."

"That's mine. You're lucky I woke. You could have had a serious case of exposure." How ironic that he woke me before I shamed myself and died from my own case of exposure.

I knelt and rolled a sock on to Caleb's cold foot.

"I can do th-that."

"You can probably do it just as well as you opened the door." I rubbed his shoulders briskly with my big hands and marveled that now he was broader and more deeply muscular. He'd definitely grown, although he was still slender. I stopped myself from asking him if he worked out. I had to keep things professional. "What were you doing outside?"

"Sm-smoking. I was about to break the window. I couldn't wake you. You were like the dead."

"I don't usually sleep so deeply." *But I was having a wet dream about you.*
"Let me see your hands."

Caleb showed me his fingers and I took them in my palms and rubbed, breathing to warm his skin. The firelight danced behind us and our shadows flickered on the wall. I worked to move his circulation, rubbing his shoulders, his feet, and back to his hands until his shivers subsided. My actions were purely clinical.

Purely.

"I think I'm fine now, just exquisitely embarrassed. I don't usually smoke, but old habits die hard. And it was the strangest evening."

"I should apologize for my family. They're a little intense."

"I remember. It seemed to all come tumbling back as soon as I saw you. Ryan was outgoing and hard to handle. Your mom was vibrant and artistic. Your dad was quiet and demanding. I remember them."

I didn't know what to say.

"Smoking seemed such a good idea forty minutes ago, and I couldn't sleep...I should have brought something to do."

"There's an entire library downstairs."

“I...couldn’t read. I went to the parlor and played the piano for a while, but then I was too keyed up.”

“So you went out in that?” Right on cue, the wind shook the shutters. “That’s extreme.”

“You have no idea. That wind whipped the cigarette right out of my hand and over the railing. Which was as fulfilling as it sounds. It’s freezing out there.”

He looked down at where I’d stopped warming his hands and was now simply stroking his long fingers with my thumb. He didn’t wear a ring anymore. I sort of missed that wide silver band just above his knuckle. It had seemed so exotic at the time. “Thanks, Doc.”

What the hell was I doing? This wasn’t my dream. This was the real thing and he was now a stranger. But he didn’t feel like a stranger. He felt like Caleb.

I dropped his hands like he’d given me contact dermatitis. He didn’t let me get far. He gripped my warm fingers before I could move away, and poof, just like magic, I was back in that alley—hard as a plank and nearly as naked.

“What...what do you think you’re doing?”

“I have no idea.” He didn’t look away—just stared so deeply into my eyes that I couldn’t hide how much I wanted him. Just a taste. One taste. Damn him. His breath was sweet, his skin back to a healthy pink—or maybe he was blushing. His graceful fingers explored the backs of my rough hands and all the blood in my body thudded through my groin, which was a serious problem because I was in my underwear. Kneeling at his feet.

He said, “Look, I’m sorry if I was rude at dinner.”

“What? You weren’t rude at all.”

“I felt rude. Unfriendly. But this entire situation took me by surprise. You took me by surprise, although you always managed to do that.” He smiled ruefully and I hadn’t a clue what he was talking about. “I never thought I’d see you again...and then...there you were. Right in front of me. I was a total ass.”

“Well, I didn’t do any better. I was definitely rude.” *Inconsequential*. “I still can’t believe you’re here. I have to wonder if you’ll disappear again.”

“I don’t plan on going anywhere—St. James is my home.” Bundled in my lace comforter, Caleb had the gall to smile in amusement—as if he knew just how badly I wanted to tear the blanket off and tumble him to the bed. I could hear him loud and clear, even in the silence, because he wanted me, too.

I had to quell the urge to rip my hands from his and flee my own room—or knock him back and wrap myself inside him.

Instead I waited—as I always did.

“Thanks for letting me in.”

“I wasn’t going to let you freeze to death, Caleb. I’m just glad you woke me.”

“Me too.” He licked his pale lips, and I was mesmerized by the slide of his tongue. My thighs cramped with need. My cock bulged with heat and I allowed Caleb to tug me by the hand—*oh God what were we doing?*

His mouth opened an inch from mine and there was a knock on the door.

“So close...” Caleb sighed and dropped my hands before I could yank them free.

My breath came short. “What the hell are we doing?”

“Reacquainting ourselves?”

“Not a good plan.” I grabbed my robe—I wasn’t letting a tousled and tired Doug Winters see my cock waving at full mast when I opened the door. I tripped over Jake, who wagged and wiggled and when Doug knocked again, I practically ripped the door from its hinge. “*What?*”

The innkeeper shrank back. “Here you go! Uhm. Well! Hey! Everything all right, then?”

I took the tray from his hands and Doug’s eyes widened at the sight of two

male guests nearly naked together at one in the morning. The sheets were a mess—and Caleb was curled in my bedding, sleepy-eyed and pink-cheeked. I could only pray that the innkeeper kept his mouth shut.

“No, actually, it’s not all right. The balcony door closed and Caleb was locked outside.”

Doug’s eyes bulged. “That’s...that’s impossible, Dr. McKenzie. Maybe it’s stuck? That can happen with the extremes in temperature, or icing, but it...it shouldn’t have locked.”

“Well, I don’t think he imagined this.”

Doug scurried to fix the door.

Caleb stood and my eyes boggled when the eyelet comforter slithered down his body. It landed in a billowy puff at his ankles. Sculpted muscle and smooth flesh were revealed in the orange light. His T-shirt molded his chest. His briefs lovingly cupped his crotch. I didn’t even pretend I wasn’t looking because, by God, he wasn’t as shriveled from the aftereffects of hypothermia as one might expect. He was gorgeous.

He reached for the sweats I’d set out and my mouth dried as he casually tied the drawstring just below his hips.

“Well, I won’t be doing that again.” It took me a second to follow his meaning as I dragged my gaze upward. He gathered his wet clothing. “And you don’t have to worry. I’ll clear out of your way.”

“Just like old times,” I said like an utter fool.

“No. Not really.” Caleb’s smile dissolved. “Night, Owen. Thanks for letting me in. I’ll see you at breakfast.”

He took his glass of warm milk and shut the door with a click.

Chapter Six

Dawn broke and the sky was an unimpressive December gray. Jake and I took our morning constitutional, running five miles to the covered bridge and back, and then I hit the shared hallway shower hoping to hell Caleb wouldn't waltz in and find me *in flagrante delicto*. Again.

"Open up, Owen." Those three words played on a permanent loop inside my feeble mind all night, and all morning. That and the real-life feel of Caleb's cold fingers warming in my palms as he tugged me almost on top of him—I should have made the shower ice cold. It had been so long since another man had touched me, even in my dreams, that I was in an embarrassing state.

I could handle my erection—literally—it was the rest I wanted to hide from.

I put the sticky shower gel to good use. Water rained on my shoulders as I rested a palm against the tile, bit my lip and lathered myself into a knee-weakening froth. The process took about thirty seconds before I slumped against the shower wall, my come dribbling down the drain. It was quick. I wasn't sure how much it helped because I still couldn't shake the memory of Caleb's green eyes reflecting in the firelight last night as he'd turned away.

Unless I planned to spend Christmas alone in my lacy room entertaining myself with the shower gel, I needed to join the other guests for breakfast. God help us all if my mother came looking for me. I grabbed my jeans and a cable-knit fisherman's sweater, and followed the clatter of cutlery and the invigorating scent of freshly brewed coffee.

In the dining room, the table was full. All holiday revelers were present and accounted for and—

Caleb drew my attention like a lodestone. In thick-framed glasses and a form-fitting black turtleneck, he wore his professor clothing like a dream. He was smart, fresh and confident and I felt more like a frumpy veterinarian than ever. I couldn't remember if I'd brushed my hair after the shower, and I'd definitely skipped shaving.

I remained unnoticed as my mother and father spoke fervently to Caleb about the family's yearly ban on *The Nutcracker*. My brother flirted shamelessly with May. She pretended she wasn't impressed with my Broadway-bound brother, and he obviously loved the challenge. They were thick as thieves. Keith was here—and somehow I'd nearly forgotten that fact. Unbelievable. Why had he come? I needed to address that this morning, because he had no business being here. He chatted with Uncle Archie, who seemed intent on piling a plate with sausage and eggs.

Caleb cut into a waffle with the side of his fork. He was the only one who saw me towering alone in the doorway. Six feet two and in this colorful family I faded into the wallpaper. I always had. With both my parents perennially in the limelight, the entire world a stage for Ryan, *And-This-Is-Owen* had practically become my given name. The afterthought. The strong and silent overachiever. The one who waited in the wings and held the bags and checked the lists.

Caleb nodded *good morning*. He glanced at something above my head and, shaking his head, he couldn't hide a smile. I swear he laughed under his breath. I swallowed remembering the foamy moments in the shower when I'd imagined that mouth closing on my cock, just like old times.

I followed Caleb's gaze—and damn if I wasn't standing directly under the mistletoe.

My cheeks burned and I moved before my mother discovered me.

Jake trotted in, and the tags on his collar tinkled. He sniffed my palm with a cold, wet nose and wagged his tail. "Hey, buddy."

Ryan stopped shoveling blueberry pancake into his already full mouth. "Sweet turtleneck, bro."

"It's a sweater."

"Very trendy."

Jake plopped down beside my father, who proved good for a handout.

"Oh, it's Owen!" My mother grinned as I walked by to take my seat. "I

ordered you a plain bran muffin, sweetheart. Just sit and have some coffee. You look spent.”

I cleared my throat, determined not to look at Caleb. “I...uh...went for a run.”

I looked anyway. Caleb tucked into a stack of waffles. They were slathered in carbohydrates, rich syrup and cholesterol-laden butter and nothing in my life had ever looked so appetizing.

“I think I’ll have waffles.”

Mom blinked back at me. “Wow. It must be Christmas.”

“It’s just a waffle, Mother. Calm down.”

I eyed my father and he seemed to be halfway through his raisin-choked oatmeal. He’d eaten toast, the crusts still on the plate, and he had a small a.m. pillbox on the table next to a glass of juice. My bet it was something rich in iron, like prune. So, my mother and his doctor were looking out for him. I can’t say I was relieved, exactly, but this was a sign that things were in hand. “Morning, Dad.”

“Ryan.” I winced as Mom whispered to him. He squinted and shook his head. “Owen. Sorry. Need to get my glasses checked again.”

There was one free chair—unfortunately, it was next to Keith.

“Morning.” He smiled as if that seat was my first choice and, just like old times, he passed the orange juice. He didn’t waste a second. “I swear I thought you were onboard with your mother’s invitation. This is so embarrassing. I should have called.”

“I know better than that.”

His chuckle told me everything. “Okay. You got me, but I came because you wouldn’t have agreed if you knew. It was underhanded.”

“It was. I don’t know what she told you, but—”

“And I know this is intrusive.” He ducked his head and I remember that there was more to him than his obvious likeness to Caleb. He was a nice guy—at least *he’d* texted me to tell me it was over. We’d had closure, unlike Caleb and I. I’d gone to the Black house that New Year’s Day, only to find it empty. No forwarding address. No word. Nothing.

Later, O.

Keith handled his fork and knife with precision and delicately carved a sausage. “I know how you must feel, but I’ll only be here for a day. That’s not a long time before I leave for Boston. I’m just glad to see you again. Maybe we could find a little time to talk.”

“Talk? You know I’m not a talker.” Unless I had the health of someone’s pet as the subject matter, I wasn’t much of a conversationalist. And if I were, I’d have found the right moment to ask Caleb what happened to him that New Year.

That was just too much of a mouthful for me.

Keith said, as if I cared, “Well, fortunately I am a talker.”

“Look. Keith—”

“I just hope we can still be friends. It sounds trite, I know, but it’s what I want. That’s all. We were friends once.” He glanced at Caleb, who in the fresh light of day didn’t resemble Keith at all. “I didn’t realize you’d have...someone else here.”

An older woman arrived in a snowman-covered apron and saved me from comment. She carried a steaming carafe of coffee and bustled to top off everyone’s cup. When she filled mine, she set the carafe next to my plate. “Waffles?”

“Absolutely.”

“You’re Dr. McKenzie?”

“I am.”

“You’re so young! I’m Katie. I was hoping to meet you this morning.” She sighed in obvious relief. I sensed my first patient in St. James, not counting the hypothermic one last night, was about to make an appointment. “I have a teensy little favor to ask of you. I know it’s Christmas and all, and you haven’t officially opened your practice yet, but Rex, our cat...”

This was my claim to fame—and it was never about me, which made me comfortable. “It’s fine. I’d love to meet him.” I smiled to put her at ease and dropped my napkin on the table. Before I pushed my chair back, she stopped me.

“Oh no. Please. It can wait until after breakfast. She’s just feeling poorly this morning. I was going to take her to the vet, but that’s twenty miles, and with the holiday and dinner to prepare...I thought—”

“It’s fine. Really. This is what I do. Rex is a she?”

Katie winked. “We didn’t know until recently. Let me get you fed first. Big guy like you needs a hot breakfast.” She hurried to fetch waffles.

“You better watch it or you’ll be doing free veterinary work for the rest of your life,” Keith said.

My mother clapped her hands and stood. Today’s holiday sweater was a fully decorated Christmas tree with tiny silver jingle bells and more blinking lights. She must wear a battery pack in her bra. I glanced casually to her left and caught Caleb watching me. He quickly turned his attention to my mother.

“I brought the hat!” My mother produced her moth-eaten Santa hat with a flourish. My father moaned. “I took the liberty of adding Caleb and May to our Secret Santa, and Keith of course, since we’ll all be a big happy family this week. Doug and Katie agreed, as well.” Caleb drank his juice but he seemed surprised to be included. Mom squeezed his shoulder. “You don’t mind, do you, love? It’ll be fun. The rules are that you take *one* name, and if you choose yourself, you have to try again—*Ryan*.”

“Oh please. That was only the one time—and let me remind you, that year I received the perfect gift.”

“The rules still stand, smarty-pants. Twenty bucks—be creative. And no food,

no condoms.” She gave a meaningful look to my brother.

“I said it was the perfect gift.”

“No fake dog poop or hot-pepper chewing gum, and no live animals.”

“Ryan,” my father said.

“These people really take the fun out of gift giving,” Ryan complained to May.

“Please don’t buy me poop,” she answered.

“You have only this morning because you have to give your Secret Santa his or her gift before midnight—”

“When Santa turns into a pumpkin,” my brother stage-whispered and May rolled her eyes.

“—so the oldsters will go together in Dad’s bus, and you young people can fit into Ryan’s Suburban. Don’t be late getting back! Doug’s letting you take the snowmobiles this afternoon before the snow hits.”

Like magic, Katie returned and a plate of waffles slathered in piping hot apples and fluffy white whipped cream was placed in front of me.

My eyes rolled back with the first taste—I just didn’t go for this sort of thing—and I demolished half of my breakfast before the hat made its way around the table. Keith went first, and after smiling, he hid the name in his pocket. “I know exactly what to buy.” He was far too satisfied. I prayed he didn’t have me and not just because he never stuck to the twenty-dollar rule.

I snagged the last scrap of paper, and predictably, *Caleb Black* was written in my mother’s neat script. Maybe all of them said *Caleb Black* and she was performing some strange matchmaking ritual. I pocketed the paper and wondered if a room key was an inappropriate gift.

I ate, tended to the obviously pregnant Rex, wrote a prescription, and then leaving Jake in the yellow room, I grabbed my coat and met everyone in the driveway. It was cold so we wasted no time piling into the Suburban and heading

into town. May sat in front and Caleb, Keith and I piled into the back. Squished next to Caleb, I tried like hell to ignore the length of his thigh against mine. His shoulder touched me. His arm touched me. I stared at the snow-covered fields and inhaled the woody scent of his aftershave. The ride was going to be the perfect blend of pleasure and torture. Particularly with Keith tightlipped and pouting at Caleb's right.

Had he always been so petulant? Maybe.

I tracked a herd of deer picking their way through the trees until we rolled across the warped boards of the St. James Bridge. May sighed happily. "I can't remember the last time I was surrounded by so many good-looking men."

"How about this morning at breakfast? And last night?" Ryan snorted. "Are you fishing?"

She knocked his shoulder. "No. I'm sure you all have turned heads your entire lives, but I was one of those girls who looked thirty at thirteen."

"Well, now you look thirteen at thirty."

It may have been the sugar that had me flapping my gums, but it was more like payback for last night. "Just because you had sex when you were fourteen doesn't mean everyone else did."

"Dude. That was so low." Ryan's surprised gaze reflected in the rearview mirror and I blinked innocently.

May's eyes bulged at Ryan. "*Fourteen?* Are you kidding me?"

"No. She was our math tutor. She was in college and I was precocious."

"That's disgusting."

"Not for me it wasn't. I was six feet tall in the ninth grade. I shaved when I was twelve. Sweetheart, I had no difficulty hitting that. But, oh man, Owen. Eighteen? That's pathetic."

It was more like twenty but I kept that to myself. Caleb wiggled beside me and

for a second, I thought he was laughing.

“God. I was twenty.” May looked back at me like I was the only other late blooming virgin in the car and I moved in case she tried to pat my hand. “It was special, for me too.”

“I thought you were twenty,” Keith bitched. “It’s like I didn’t know you at all.” He squinted at Caleb. “Who in the hell are you?”

“I’m Caleb Black.”

“That’s not actually an answer.”

“It is for me,” Caleb said.

I broke in. “He was the first guy who ever drove me home.”

My brother snorted from the driver’s seat. “Keith. FYI. That’s a euphemism for the first guy Owen ever let into his pants.”

I had to agree. “Actually, it was.”

Caleb surprised me with a quiet, “Me, too.”

I quelled the crazy urge to squeeze his hand. Instead, I pressed myself against the door.

“Didn’t you ever have someone like that? A secret love from your past?” May asked.

“No. I don’t keep secrets from my lovers.”

He just bored them to death. This wasn’t going to end well so I watched the scenery—Vermont beneath a half foot of fresh snow, even on a bleary day, was still bright. I needed to pick up some sunglasses.

“What about your first crush? You know when you can’t eat or think or breathe without them? Or with them for that matter? Oh my God, it makes me sick just remembering it.”

“That’s depressing. I never felt anything like that.” Ryan steered us efficiently to town. “I just banged chicks in high school and they gave me teddy bears and rope bracelets.”

“That’s because you’re spoiled and emotionally stunted,” she said and I wanted her as my sister-in-law. She spoke to Keith. “Maybe what happened was too personal—and special. That’s how it felt to me. As if everything in the world hinged on that single moment in time—and it was too private to share.”

Caleb shifted beside me. His hand slid casually against his denim-clad leg and his knuckles brushed my thigh. They brushed again and I knew it wasn’t an accident.

My heart knocked against my rib cage.

May looked directly at us and Caleb didn’t move his hand.

“I bet it meant a lot to both of you—to be gay in a small town during high school. That’s so isolating and terrifying. And to find someone you like, who likes you back?” She pressed her hands to her heart. “Oh, and *then* to make that first move when you’re afraid not only of rejection but of...your feelings about yourself? Knowing your secret could be out? Oh my God, I bet that first *everything* was explosive. To risk everything? That’s so hot. No wonder you’re still single, Cay. You had that first big ‘O’ with Owen. That’s as good as it gets.”

“Wow. You talk more than my mother. I didn’t know that was possible,” Ryan said.

“Can we just drive into town?” Keith snapped. “I have shopping to do.”

“Sure. Sorry. I was just thinking out loud. But they were lucky to have each other.” She winked at me as if she were delivering a message—*Single. Caleb is single. Over and out*—and she faced front. Silence descended.

She was right, though. Caleb and I *were* damn fortunate. At the time, it had felt miraculous that Caleb returned my interest. It had been everything May said—which made that pain slice so much deeper when it abruptly ended.

I felt warm. Why wouldn’t Ryan at least put the damn radio on? I’d take

Christmas carols or even Fox News over this lead-weighted quiet. Ryan didn't so much as crack a smile, just focused on switching lanes and bringing us into town.

Caleb's knuckles rested on my thigh. It was nearly enough to distract me from Keith's anger.

"Special," he muttered and frowned out the window like he was considering leaping from the vehicle. Or tossing Caleb into the snow.

We entered St. James. The roads were plowed and freshly salted, and every sidewalk bustled with last-minute shoppers in bundled clothing. The street lamps were decorated with red bows and holly and Santa rang a bell on the corner in front of the Starbucks. Christmas carols warbled from loudspeakers on the traffic-choked street.

There wasn't a parking space to be had.

I found Mom's list in my coat pocket and I almost dropped it. *Condoms* was the first thing she'd written—with a smiley face next to it. The woman was a menace. A single-minded menace.

Caleb poked at my list. "How many names did you take?"

"No one is allowed to touch this list." I snatched it away. "And I have one name—same as you."

Ryan swore as he searched for parking. "Even the library is full."

"Just park at my house." My mother had the craziest things on her list. Where was I going to find Uncle Duncan's hair pomade? And blood oranges? Was she making a potion? I skimmed, but eye of newt didn't make an appearance.

"Your house?" Keith made a choked sound.

"Oh. Yeah, I move in next week—after the closing. It's not a secret. I bought a little—I guess it's a bungalow. It's a small white house with black shutters." I'd just described every house in St. James. "It has a porch."

Keith blustered, “You *bought* a house?”

“I said as much. This is where I live.” I would have to be blunt. “I’m thirty-three and this is a sound investment.”

Ryan turned onto Maple Street—my street—and lectured everyone in the car, “It’s customary to congratulate someone on purchasing his or her first home. Not bitch at them or whine. So congratulations, brother mine. Also, please note that it’s the done thing to send a gift to the new owner’s brother.”

“It’s just a house. The new practice is a block away. It’s a buyer’s market and this made good fiscal sense.”

May said, “Oh, I love this street. All the trees and the brick work. Is it here?”

“Right here,” Ryan said as he stopped the Suburban in front of my empty house. The SOLD sign was buried under a snowdrift, as was the porch, the walk, the driveway and most of the house.

“It looks adorable,” May said.

“It looks expensive,” Keith grumbled.

“It’s only a block from my house,” Caleb said and he finally moved his hand from my thigh. “That’s...really...*really* wild, isn’t it? What a small world.”

“Close your mouth, bro, you’re catching flies.”

I clicked my teeth together and Keith finally snapped at Caleb. “Why are you staying at the inn if you live right here? That doesn’t make any sort of sense.”

Caleb’s look was even. “May’s mother passed away—and the rest of her family is in Missouri. Doug and Katie invited us.”

Ryan sent May a sympathetic smile and said, “That’s awful, sweetheart. I’m so sorry.”

She nodded. “Thanks, Ryan.”

Keith looked immediately contrite. He raked his fingers through his black hair and yanked at his fancy cashmere scarf. He didn't look a thing like Caleb to me, then or now. "I'm so sorry. It's just this situation is...very unusual. I came to say hello—I didn't mean to be so...but really you just blindsided me."

"Then go back to Boston." I buttoned my jacket and pocketing the shopping list. I said,

"This is where I live now, Keith. I'm not coming back. Deal with it."

Chapter Seven

Hours later, I trudged through the front door in a pair of Doug Winters's snowmobile boots. The sleigh bells jingled overhead and I stopped short at the sight of Keith waiting for me. It was like I couldn't hide. However, with his camel coat buttoned and his Burberry bag on his shoulder, it appeared I wouldn't have to anymore.

He didn't smile as he handed me a red foil-wrapped box. "For Uncle Archie. It's a carved maple chess set. I thought he'd like to whoop your father in something other than cards."

"That's generous." And thoughtful. "But you broke the rule again."

"Sue me. You can't get a decent Christmas present for nineteen ninety-nine in St. James Vermont on Christmas Eve—although you probably did." He glanced at the line of snowmobiles waiting by the barn, and then he stared at his Audi. Clouds covered the sky—it was going to snow. "I wanted to say good-bye."

"You're leaving, then." I couldn't quite contain my relief. "Probably a good idea before the storm hits."

Keith snapped, "Your mother *did* invite me. Months ago."

"I understand that, but I'm still not clear why the hell you agreed to come." The conversation ramped up so quickly, I didn't have time to get my feelings in check.

"I agreed because I was alone and she said that you were lonely, too. I hoped you'd be open to a conversation—that maybe we could come to some sort of common ground. Find a friendship. We did have some good times."

Had we? It really didn't matter at this point, because his text-message breakup was reason enough not to let my guard down. Although that might be an excuse. My guard had been up for years. I frowned at him. "I guess—but my life is here now. Or it will be."

I let that sink in. We stood at the top of the porch as the wind whistled across the field. The sleigh bells jingled. Jake loped up the stairs, his nose white with snow, and I let him into the house. Down at the barn, my mother, May, Ryan and Caleb waited for me. May used her hands a lot as she chatted. Sometimes she used them to punch Ryan in his shoulder. They made a good team.

Ryan waved to me. “Move your ass, bro. Let’s go.”

Caleb leaned against the split-rail fence with his arm folded. Resplendent in borrowed snowmobile gear, I felt his gaze even from this distance.

“Your mother said you had things in your past to deal with and that you’re starting over. I wasn’t sure what she meant until now.”

I broke free from Caleb’s gaze and gaped in surprise at Keith. “My mother said that? Out loud?”

“She did. I thought—erroneously—that you had regrets about our relationship. About never opening up.” He nodded stiffly toward Caleb. “But I see she had something else in mind entirely.”

“Keith. My mother didn’t know he was here. None of us knew.”

“You don’t actually believe this just happened do you?” His smile mocked me. “Did you think St. Nick delivered your one true love for Christmas? You’re smarter than that. Although you’re about as warm as ever.”

“You’re doing a shit job if you came all the way here to reconcile.”

“I’m not trying to reconcile. I drove the five hours here because I wanted closure. We all have someone we let get away, Owen. God knows you did. I see that now. I wished...I just wish it had been different for us.”

“That’s total bullshit. You ended it.”

“There was nothing to end. I was the only one in the relationship. You held yourself so far back that you never even told me about him. That’s telling, don’t you think?” Keith pulled a pair of fancy driving gloves from the pocket of his wool coat. “So. Merry Christmas. I’m on my way home—I have plans to join

some friends later tonight. Good luck and I hope you don't freeze to death here in Vermont. It's fucking cold."

And with that, Keith left.

I joined the others and handed my mother Uncle Archie's present. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." I zipped my borrowed coat. "Why wouldn't I be? It was a long time ago."

"He still hurt you. And I am sorry I invited him."

"No more matchmaking."

"Agreed." She sighed with pleasure as Caleb joined us. "You boys turned into such handsome men. So strong and sweet." Bundled in a red parka, fur framed her face so that she appeared to be looking out of a tunnel. "I want you both to go out there and have some fun."

"You should come with us. You need some fun, too." Caleb's invitation took me off guard, but he smiled so warmly at my mother I found myself nodding in agreement.

"Oh, no, no. I have other things to do." She shook her hand and I knew inside her mitten, she was wagging her finger at both of us. "I have a ton of presents to wrap. Someone was very good this year! Did you get something for your Secret Santa?"

"Don't be coy, Mom. You know that I did." I'd probably regret it, but I was feeling nostalgic and a little...uncharacteristically sentimental. Besides, the stores were all closed now and it was too late to return it.

"Is it naughty or nice?"

"It's a ten-dollar iTunes card," I said with a straight face.

Mom huffed, "You wouldn't be so unimaginative."

We were all snug in matching sky-blue ski-do suits and gray helmets and ready to ride. I kicked the heel of my boot against the side of the snowmobile and as I threw my leg over, Ryan pegged me with a chunk of snow. “Really?” I said. “You want to start that now?”

He grinned and packed snow between his gloves. “Bring it.”

“Think fast.” *Smack*. Ryan got hit right in the kisser. May was unapologetic, but she showed us how fast she could run as Ryan chased her across the driveway.

“That girl couldn’t have been more perfect if I’d hand-picked her myself.”

“If you had picked her I’d be convinced otherwise, but yeah.”

Mom handed me a bag of supplies. “This is from Doug and Katie. Hot coffee, no whiskey. Sandwiches and some condoms.”

I didn’t bat a lash, but Caleb coughed. “You’re telling me that Doug and Katie Winters packed condoms for our hour-long ride? What? Are we supposed to have an orgy in a snow bank?”

“You should always seize the opportunity for love. When your father and I were in *Le Corsaire*, we made love in the wings between acts.”

“That must have been pretty crowded.”

“I think that sounds romantic, Mrs. McKenzie.”

“No it doesn’t. It sounds impossible.” I shot Caleb a look. “Please don’t encourage her.”

You live a block away from my house. I hadn’t moved far beyond that thought all morning as I shopped in town for Brylcreem and found a present for my Secret Santa.

Caleb Black was currently my enigmatic *neighbor*.

May and Ryan continued to fire ammunition at each other as Caleb searched

the cloud-covered sky. “We should go. I think we have about an hour before the snow hits.” And with a jolt, he sped across the field.

We followed—entering the trail through a break in the stone wall. Ryan opened the throttle and led. May bounced along clinging to his back, her sturdy arms wrapped tight, her helmet dove-gray in the afternoon light. The two tore across the snow and Caleb was close behind.

I took my usual last-place position, allowing the trailblazers to race ahead. Ryan’s competitive nature took hold and he never noticed how far behind I was—or he was used to it. I allowed him to disappear around the next bend and when I gained enough space to move, I opened the throttle, the engine screamed, the machine shook and the first snowflakes fell. My mind was on Keith’s words as I wrestled to stay on the trail.

You never let yourself open up.

I caught up with the others just as they cruised into the woods. We moved less swiftly through the trees. Bunched together in a line, we rumbled over the hills in the steadily falling snow. Eventually the path dumped us onto an ice-crusted road. Snow snaked across the road as the wind blasted over the mountain.

Caleb kept a pace that surprised me until I realized he was waiting for me. I stopped, the engine chugging between my thighs, and pushed my visor up. “Trouble?”

“I was about to ask you the same.”

“No, I’m good. I do my own thing.”

“You do it slowly. Not that I ever had cause to complain.” His words were so unexpected, they chased the cold away.

I flicked the headlights on and slapped my visor back in place as the storm swallowed the whine of my brother’s engine. His taillights blinked and his snowmobile vanished. The wind gusted heartily and in single blast, the entire world turned white.

The trip was pretty exhilarating, but it was time to find shelter. “Let’s head

back.”

“C’mon.”

Within fifty feet, conditions turned fierce. This time when we slowed, we kept a careful pace. The squall turned into an absolute whiteout. I concentrated on Caleb’s red taillights shimmering in front of me.

When he stopped again, I knew we missed the cut-off for the mountain road. “It’s too icy under the trees.” I barely heard him.

Ryan and May were a good half mile or so ahead of us, and now the snow thickened until I couldn’t see the end of my skis.

“There’s a place we can stop. May’s probably waiting for us.”

“Fine. Lead on.”

The landmarks resembled those in my dream from last night—lumps of obstacles to be avoided. This would have been a fine time for my glasses, and Caleb didn’t have his on. How the hell could he see? But after fifteen minutes of intense driving, he stopped and called out, “Barn.”

I would have missed it. The building wasn’t the romantic structure I expected of a snowy Vermont barn. From what I could make out, it was a newly constructed freestanding garage. It looked as cold as I felt.

I helped Caleb kick a path clear in the snow, and we slid the door on a well-oiled hinge. The snowmobiles were safely inside before he removed his helmet.

“That was intense.” He laughed, his breath a white cloud. “I love the snow.”

I grinned at him, tearing my own helmet off. “I remember.”

White spots stuck to his hair as his knee slid roughly between mine. His cold hand stroked my nape, but the other rested against the wall by my cheek. His knuckles were chapped. He still held the pilfered mistletoe.

“Are you afraid?”

“No.”

“Bull.” His tongue was hot as he licked my lip and I jerked back in surprise. “You’re terrified.”

I was more terrified by the thrust of his hips into my crotch than the flavor of mint ChapStick on his mouth. I licked back, all false bravado. “So are you.”

“Maybe, but I know exactly what I want. I want you.” He didn’t hesitate. His eyes closed and he kissed me breathless. He kissed the air away, the cold away, the fear away. He kissed me until I forgot we were taking a risk, right there against the wall as the entire senior class writhed to Nirvana only a few feet away. Caleb Black kissed me like we were the only two people left in the entire world.

Green eyes were lit from some unknown light source inside the dank barn—or maybe Caleb’s light just came from within. I swear he was remembering that momentous kiss, as well.

I looked around. “Where are we anyway?”

“This place belongs to a friend. We’ll wait in the house until the storm passes. Believe me, no one would want us out there now.”

“So we’re not breaking in?”

“As a rehabilitated former delinquent, and a career-minded assistant department chair, I swear the key is on a peg under the eaves.” Caleb stuck his helmet under his arm and stepped into the squall. “Keep close. I don’t want to lose you in the storm.” And he was sucked into the blowing white wind.

Chapter Eight

Caleb flipped the switch and I was foolishly surprised when the lights blinked on. “It’s not a hunting shack, Owen. It’s a weekend home.”

“Right.”

We entered a simple post-and-beam living room with a towering stone fireplace. Comfortable plaid furnishings scattered the room. I shucked my boots and stripped my wet outerwear, leaving everything by the door. The woodbin was filled and because there was no question I needed a task, I made a beeline for the fireplace. “I’ll start the fire in case the power goes.”

“Good idea.”

Anything but facing the reality of being trapped alone with Caleb Black and nothing to do but each other. It was one thing to dream of it, even joke about it, but it was quite another to act on it. The vision of him in his underwear last night, that eyelet bedcover pooling at his feet, the past, the present, all of it was seared on the inside of my eyelids. And with each good memory of Caleb replaying in my mind, I was that much closer to laying my cards on the table. I wanted to open up. At least...I did with him.

I’d come to St. James to start fresh and maybe reclaim what was left of my pride after being routinely dumped for years. Since the moment I’d crossed that bridge to Evergreen, my past stood smack in front of me. There was nowhere to run.

Caleb lifted the phone. “Phone’s out.”

“Of course it is. There any other places like this on the way back?”

“A few. May’ll find somewhere to hole up. Don’t worry. She’s resourceful.”

I nodded. The only thing to be done was text my parents—maybe a text would go where a call could not—and wait.

Caleb pattered. He shook his coat free of snow and lined our boots by the fireplace. He finally went into the galley kitchen and the sound of cupboard doors opening and closing followed him.

The baseboards crackled as the furnace kicked in, amplifying the exquisite degree of tension in the cabin. I made myself useful piling logs on the grate, and then I did my level best to coax a fire while my mind raced through the possibilities. We were alone in this house. We were miles from Evergreen. We'd be here for hours and my mother had packed condoms. *Seize the opportunity.*

Christ. I needed a drink.

"I need a drink," Caleb blurted before I could. His fingers dug pathways in his flattened hair. He rifled deeper through the cupboards. "I'm sure the last person you'd ever imagine being stuck alone with is me. You like scotch, right?"

"A bit." Sterno sounded appealing right now.

"Good. Speyside at its finest." He waved a bottle of Glenfiddich and fifteen minutes later, Caleb kicked back on the braid rug with his turtleneck off. He leaned against the worn couch, in front of my five-alarm fire, looking warm and comfy and at ease with himself. I'd perhaps overdone it because the house felt like a sweat lodge. Caleb rested lazily in his T-shirt, staring at the roughhewn ceiling, and finished his scotch. "Have you been to Scotland? Damn fine people."

"Edinburgh. For a conference." I prowled the edges of the room, checking from window to window in case the weather broke. I cracked my knuckles and examined the bars on my cell phone. Still nothing. My first drink was gone in seconds and, because it hadn't helped, I sampled another.

Why was I so bloody nervous? We were adults. I knew if I pursued it, he'd have sex with me. I knew it and still...I held back—because if I wanted meaningless sex, I could have fucked Keith before he hightailed it back to Boston.

And now, Caleb captivated me. Firelight turned the ends of his hair orange, and his skin blushed with heat and booze. He contemplated the ceiling as if a

topic of conversation was etched somewhere on the woodwork. I dragged my attention back to the storm. “I remember you always wanted to go to Scotland.”

That seemed a safe enough topic.

“Yup. I went and fucked my way through grad school.” He grinned as I choked. “Just kidding.”

“Funny.”

I wished I could think of a single goddamn meaningful thing to say instead of pacing the floor like a caged animal while the wind shrieked without cease. It was only four in the afternoon on Christmas Eve and it felt like the dead of night. I bit the inside of my cheek and hoped to hell Ryan had gotten May home safely. I hoped someone let Jake out to do his business.

I hoped my father didn’t have cancer again.

When Caleb broke the silence, he was amused. “Do you ever sit?”

“Yes, of course I do.”

“Relax. My God, you’re so stiff. I’m not going to bite.” He ran his index finger along the edge of his glass until it hummed. His chuckle was a little self-effacing, as if he remembered I had more than once begged him to bite me, and he said, “I mean...unless you ask me to.”

“I’m fine. I’ll sit in a minute. I just need to tend the fire.” The fire crackled energetically.

“It looks pretty healthy to me.”

Why hadn’t we turned the radio on? Normal people turned the TV or the radio on, didn’t they?

I paced, walking from the fireplace to the back door and snow, snow and everywhere more snow and wind and holy hell, it was all a little confining. “We should listen to the weather.”

“Why? We can see it perfectly.” Caleb splayed across the carpet in his undershirt and the sight made me sweat. That could have been the heat from the fire. He snared me with a knowing look. “Are you trying to hide or trying to run?”

“Neither. You’re damn direct, aren’t you?”

He shrugged. “It’s been fifteen years. I’ve got nothing to lose, right? What’s the worst that can happen? You can tell me to go to hell.”

“I could.”

“But you won’t. That’s not your way. Why didn’t you tell Keith about us?”

“Jesus, Caleb. Dive right in, why don’t you?”

“Why pussyfoot around?”

“I don’t...are you saying I pussyfoot?”

His chest shook with amusement. “Absolutely.”

Just the sight of his half-naked arms sent blood coursing through my veins to thicken my groin. His forearm rested on his knee and his thumbnail was worn—as it was at eighteen. He still bit at his thumb. I found that incredibly endearing, as I did the coarse growth of whiskers on his jaw, and fine blond hair on his arms.

Shit. I was pussyfooting. Twenty minutes ago I’d been happy flying through the fields alone with the elements, and now I was at a crossroad and I needed to find the courage to take this step.

“Fine. It’s because Keith, in the long run, didn’t matter.” That sounded unbelievable callous, even to my ears, but I’d been biding my time with Keith. Waiting.

I set my empty glass on the mantel. The fire didn’t need it, but I moved the screen and threw another log onto the inferno. Sparks flew in every direction. “It wouldn’t have changed anything in our relationship to tell him about you.”

“That’s because you weren’t invested in having a relationship. The poor guy—although he should have seen it coming.”

“He was happy enough.” *For a time.* I took the poker and jabbed the fire with more energy than necessary—more sparks popped and hissed around my head. “Anyway, he ended it.”

“You never began it, Owen. You don’t really have relationships. Even with your family. You’re safe on the perimeter.” Caleb capped the whiskey and set his own empty glass on the table. He got up and I had to look away from the sight of him stretching languidly in the firelight. His skin was pale, but flawless.

“Are you always this...”

“Honest? No. But I still can’t believe you’re actually here—and I don’t want to fuck this up.” He moved close enough that his shirt brushed against my back. He was right there, just within my reach. “I want to know you again. I never met anyone who made me feel the way you do.”

I took the leap. “Then why did you leave?”

“Owen. You dope. I didn’t leave—I was a terrified kid. My father found it easier to break my nose than to have a queer kid for his son. He sent me away. And the longer I was gone, the more I believed every lie he told me. That you wouldn’t want me anymore.”

“I always wanted you.” I had to slug scotch to wet my throat, and I gripped the mantel hard enough to turn my knuckles white. The storm mocked me from the window. *There’s nowhere to hide, Dr. McKenzie.*

“I used to believe that what happened between us was all in my mind. That to you, I was inconsequential.” His breath touched my neck, and I couldn’t turn around.

“You can’t possibly believe that.” *I see you everywhere.* “I was embarrassingly committed.”

“You announced it to your family last night. You said it meant nothing. I wasn’t even interesting enough to mention to your lover. But May was right

earlier, because what she said? That's exactly how I felt. It *was* special. I hoped it was to you, too."

"It was."

"You know, I used to wait just to catch a glimpse of you."

"When?" This time, I did look at him. He was close enough to see the yellow striations striping his irises.

"That entire first half of the school year, before you ever spoke to me in the library. I saw you standing in the hall on my first day and I had to know who you were. I needed to find out everything about you. I couldn't...not look at you."

"You didn't tell me that."

"I know. I used to watch you come up the stairs—I didn't even have a class on that floor and I failed history because I was late for fifth period every single day for an entire month."

"I never knew that."

"I can't imagine how. I stood at your damn locker. And I waited in that parlor last night for you to come through the door, as sick to my stomach as I was every day fifteen years ago. We've come full circle because I'm still waiting for Owen McKenzie to notice me—and you're waiting for me to make the first move. So. Here it is."

I swallowed hard, and I waited.

"I'm sorry I left you." Caleb's hand settled on my shoulder and he squeezed. I closed my eyes, but it didn't help. He crept under the edges, and slipped inside me. His palm stroked my sweater in a warm circle right over my heart. "I didn't really leave you. I was eighteen and he shipped me to South Carolina because he was through with me. My mother died, and I was a disappointing fag, failing classes and fucking around with the most beautiful boy in the world, who I loved with all my heart—and he sent me to hell. Military school. I repeated the twelfth grade and it was brutal. I wanted to tell you beforehand and then it was too late. It kept getting closer and closer...and I was afraid. And you were so kind. So..."

safe. I was a kid and I thought if I didn't deal with the unpleasant things they'd go away."

I knew exactly how he felt. "But they didn't go away, because I thought if I could be the best—the perfect son, the valedictorian, if I never made a wave or caused a problem—my father wouldn't be sick anymore. And then you left me." I choked. "I loved you. I was all alone and I had no one. I didn't know what happened to you. It was like...nothing mattered, and it mattered so much. To me."

"I'm sorry." His breath tickled my neck and his voice changed. "I wish I could change it all, but I'm glad for who I am. And you turned out pretty fucking fine, Dr. McKenzie."

I snorted, and then I tensed as his hands snuck under my shirt and robbed me of my pride.

"So tell me, why are you still wearing this sweater? Aren't you hot? It's like a furnace in here."

"That's the lamest come-on I've ever heard."

"Relax."

Caleb's lips touched my skin, just below my ear, and a tiny burst of electricity shot between us with a *pop* and that was all it took for me to finally snap.

I was gone.

I fell fast and hard, leaping to snatch him by his shoulders and we stumbled until we landed unchecked on the sofa. Without a second to think or yield or take a breath, I crushed him underneath me.

He was ready. Mouth open, eyes bright, hands digging into my hips, Caleb was as willing and able as ever.

I licked into his mouth and tasted whiskey. "God, you taste so good."

Caleb grappled for hold on my hair, my ass, my shoulder. He bit and sucked

and his hands touched everything at once. His heel hooked my knee and as my swollen dick collided with his erection, he made a noise. “Christ, Owen, what took you so long?”

“It’s only been a day.”

“And I see you’re still as rock hard as ever.”

The pillows scattered. I snagged him under his ass and hiked him flush against me. Crotch to crotch we rocked together, thrusting and kissing and working ourselves in perfect unison.

He bit my chin and yanked at my sweater. “Take this off.”

“You take it off me.” *Jesus*. I had no idea who was in control, because neither of us had any as we tore at buttons and zippers and struggled for a handhold on each other. I wanted everything all at once. Right now. I’d been denied for too long. When his fingers worked my belt, I searched his face. The stubble-covered jaw, the bump on his nose, the pale green eyes so perfect and clear, that tangle of impossibly thick lashes—he was here. Caleb Black was with me at last.

Caleb smiled evilly and his smooth hand slithered inside my pants. He manhandled my cock like a pro. “I want you. Since you walked into the room last night, all I wanted to do was slide right inside you. Tell me you want it too.”

“I do.” I shut my eyes and fucked into his waiting palm as searing, blistering heat turned my balls into hard stones. I did—I wanted him inside me. I’d never had him—never had anyone inside me. It was as if I’d been waiting my whole life for Caleb.

He ground long and thick into my hand.

“Take your pants off.”

“You want me, you take them off me, Owen.”

I laughed and licked his neck, following a trail of bayberry scent from his clavicle to his pectorals to his armpits. His hair was light and his soap was spicy. And I was still terrified that he’d pushed me into this—this needy wide-open

gut-wrenching, disastrous *thing* that I hadn't felt since I was eighteen. That one and only time and I'd been so badly singed I never stuck my heart into that particular fire again.

He'd exposed me skillfully, completely, and I was so grateful, I nearly said thank you. Instead, I nipped a path to his nipples, pebbled hard just like old times and I sucked that little nugget right in as he stroked my cock. "Squeeze."

He did. He worked my cock rough, jacking me with skill. He wasn't tender, which was a good thing, because I couldn't handle any more tenderness. I needed to come.

I wasn't a scared virgin anymore. I was thirty-three years old and I knew exactly how to bring a guy off. So I worked Caleb's tit between my teeth as my thumb rasped over the fat crown of his dick. It was slippery and when he moaned, my voice went pitch-black with need. "You think I'm still that same kid, Caleb? You can't just walk away this time."

He grabbed my wrist. "Is that what you think this is? I don't want you to leave, either."

"I won't. I never did. That was all you."

I yanked his hand off me and wriggled his pants down to his thighs. His erection sprang free, beautiful and eager and thick. That was about all I could contemplate before he pushed into my mouth with a heavy, "Oh yeah."

Salt and spice. His fingers tightened in my hair and Caleb made noise. He made a lot of noise—just like I remembered. He moaned like it had been as long for him as it had for me. Which was probably wishful thinking on my part.

I sucked the cap of his penis and then he nestled inside, almost to my throat. He was hobbled by his pants, which turned him on tremendously if his noise level was anything to go by. He howled and it took no time at all. He didn't blow because we were new at this or stupid kids who could get off if the wind blew hard—he exploded without hesitation because this was us. This was Owen and Caleb, and we were supposed to be together. He shuddered and stiffened and semen shot the taste of sea and cream onto my tongue. His juice poured into me.

I held on and nudged him to the very edge of bliss, until he slumped into the cushion.

His fingers caressed my hair and he laid a wrist over his eyes. “Wow, Dr. McKenzie. You’ve improved substantially in the last fifteen years. Where the hell have you been my whole life?”

I scaled his body slowly until our chests aligned. “Hey, I never went anywhere—I’ve been in Boston. I just grew up.”

I kissed his wrist, where the veins delivered blood back to his heart and he moved to kiss me back.

“Was that too much?” I should have been tender or something. Caring. Loving. I should have slowed it down and showed him how much I wanted him.

“It’s been fifteen years. I’m not going to complain about coming in your mouth. Jesus, it’s even better than I remembered.”

“I...I feel like I should read to you now.” What a foolish, sentimental, revealing thing to even think. I blushed saying it aloud. I traced the bump on his nose with my index finger, and forged ahead because I meant every word. “What would you like?”

“Later. I would love that. No one’s read to me in a long time. Why don’t you let me...?” He slid my pants down, nibbled my neck, and I swear to God I heard sleigh bells ring.

Bells.

No. Not bells. It was a series of jingles. *Jingle-jingle jingle.*

Fuck, *fuck*—the noise came from the mantel and it took me two more rings to identify my cell phone. It chirped intrusive, insistent, invasive and... *jingle-jingle jingle.*

I slumped. “I can’t believe it.”

“Get it.” Caleb kissed my chest, and then he moved. “It’s okay.”

The first time I'd had sex in nearly a year with another man—*this man*—and it ended with me scrambling for the phone. I was on vacation. I panted, "Hello?"

"Oh thank God! I've been calling for an hour."

My mother. Of all the people to disturb me when I was finally having sex, why did it have to be my mother? The heat level in my groin dropped twenty degrees.

"Hello? Where are you? Ryan came back and said he'd lost you in the storm."

"Ryan's back. That's good news. We're fine, Mom. Don't worry."

Caleb grabbed his shirt. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder with a grin and mouthed, *bathroom*. I nodded and he disappeared.

Outside, dusk forced its way through holes of gray sky. It would be dark soon. The snow had stopped. Maybe Caleb's orgasm had blown it from the clouds.

"Owen? Hello? This goddamn phone never works—"

"Mom. I can hear you. It looks like the storm's clearing. We stopped at...I have no idea where we are."

"Listen to me. It's your father. Did you get any of my messages?—he—an—Dad. We're at the—doctor says—and—I need you—"

"Hello? Mom? I can't hear you."

The phone beeped as the signal dropped and I was alone staring as snow whipped across the covered porch. My heart froze.

Something had happened to my father and I wasn't there.

It seemed unreasonable and unlikely that there was an emergency, yet I couldn't still the myriad of medical scenarios flickering through my mind. Not one of them positive. He could have had a seizure or a bleed or a heart attack.

I saw his face clearly from last night as he'd stuffed himself silly on ham, laughing with his brothers, feeding my dog tidbits under the table when my

mother said not to.

Pants. Coat. Helmet. I was still cramming my feet into warm snowmobile boots when I stumbled through the door and into the bitter wind and unspoiled snow.

I needed to get to my father.

Chapter Nine

It took forty-five minutes to travel a scant two miles because I'd gotten lost in the forest of snowy trees. Just like my goddamn dream. I hadn't a clue where I was until I passed the covered bridge, and therefore Caleb arrived ahead of me. His vehicle was parked by the Winterses' big gray barn, and I felt more like an ass than ever.

I ripped the front door wide and the sleigh bells clanged and swung and then, those idiot jingle bells dropped to the floor with a clatter. I traipsed into the house with my boots on and kept going, right through the entry, under the Christmas ball, down the papered hallway, striding purposefully toward my mother's off-kilter voice as she warbled through "Deck the Halls." They were singing. All of them. The house smelled of cinnamon and clove, and, I couldn't see anything except absolute red.

I entered the parlor. I didn't linger at the fringes as I usually did. I blew in like a blizzard—bringing my cold fury right into the center of the family circle. My mother ended the song on a predictably flat note. My uncle Archie glanced away from his chess game with my uncle Duncan. Katie served Christmas cookies and eggnog from the wheeled trolley. Like everything else at Evergreen, the scene was picture-postcard perfect.

I just couldn't believe it. "What the hell is going on here? I thought there was an *emergency*."

My father sat on the couch with a glass of eggnog in his pale hand and a stack of snickerdoodles perched on his knee. "Owen! We were about to send a search party."

He was ready for dinner in his favorite Christmas tie and a herringbone blazer. He was alert and on task—and evidentially, he was hungry. I should be happy about this. I was happy about this, but my family didn't look concerned for *my* welfare. Not in the least. I'd been lost for hours in a damn snow squall and they were caroling in my absence. They hadn't even known I was gone—not really.

I should have stayed at the cabin with Caleb.

It was unfounded, but I glared at my father as if he had the audacity to be well while I'd been driving laps through the forest on a ski machine. I was coming to his rescue—needing to do something practical and earnest to save him. And from what? The only thing he needed was a napkin. He had crumbs on his chin.

“Did you people even notice that I was missing?”

My mother clapped a hand to her bosom and said, “Owen! We were so worried about you.”

They were all dressed and ready for dinner. Ties. Jackets. Shiny shoes. Lipstick. May and my mother both wore red holiday dresses and black heeled boots. “Really? You look like you were going to eat dinner without me.”

“Of course we were not! If you hadn't just arrived, Ryan was going to search for you.”

My brother didn't look like he was going anywhere. He had reindeer horns on his head and a glass of eggnog in his hand. He was in his bare socks. “Caleb just got here ten minutes ago, bro. We assumed you were together. He said you were bringing up the rear.” He blinked innocently.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Owen.” Mom snagged the helmet from my hands and set it on the coffee table. “You're overwrought. Calm down. You're always late—there's no reason to get testy about it.” She reached for my coat zipper and I wrenched away.

“I thought Dad had a medical emergency. A TIA or a seizure ...or worse.” I raked my fingers through my hair until I had a handful and I just...held on. I must have looked like I wanted to yank my hair out, but I was keeping myself from flying apart. “I thought there was an emergency—I got lost in the fucking woods and you're all in here impersonating the Von Trapp family.”

“Good Lord. I wouldn't call to tell you bad news over the phone like that,” Mom said.

“Why would you think such a thing?”

My father set his eggnog down. “I’m fine. Not *fine* obviously...but I’m not dire. I’m just having trouble with my iron. Long-term effects from my illness. My medication needs to be adjusted. Otherwise, I’m fine. I’m just old.”

“You’re not old.” But he was old and no longer the hearty man I remembered from so long ago, when he’d been larger than life—and filled with such passion. He was small, and thin, and older than he ought to be.

My mother said firmly, “Dr. Larson wanted to deliver good news as soon as he heard. For Christmas. That’s what I was trying to tell you before the phone cut out. We weren’t going to have dinner without you either, Owen. We love you. Now, take your coat off and go get ready. Everything is fine.”

Why wasn’t *I* fine? One hour with Caleb and the walls I’d constructed as a young man—they’d crumbled. I’d been so afraid of losing Dad, so terrified of losing every person I’d ever loved, that I hadn’t let them inside for years. I’d kept them all at arm’s length.

I surprised my father and myself by pulling him from the couch and hugging him with a little more force than necessary. His bones practically creaked while I soaked his best clothing.

“It’s okay.” He squeezed me back. The whole family stared goggle-eyed at my display, but screw it, I hugged him hard. “Really. It’s good news.”

“I know it is. But you have to do what Dr. Larson says—to the letter. You need to follow the protocol.” I let him go gently.

“I will.”

“I want to meet with your oncologist. We’re going to have more Christmases together. As a family.” I choked as I laid my demands on the table.

“Of course we will.” My father patted my hand.

I gathered what dignity I had left, as well as my wet clothing. Looking around, I realized exactly who was missing from our family scene. For the space of a

single breath I was convinced he'd left for good. But he wouldn't make that mistake twice. He loved me.

He should be here with the rest of us—he belonged here as much as I did. “Where the hell is he, anyway?”

“Jake?” Ryan answered. “He’s sleeping in the kitchen and waiting for the cat to have kittens.”

I moaned. I had completely forgotten. Our first patient in St. James and Jake was a better vet than me.

“She’s fine, though.”

“Thank you.” Fortunately Rex wouldn't be ready for another day or so. “But that’s not who I meant.”

“Oh. Well, my guess is Caleb’s already packing.”

“Ryan!” May’s eyes went round as saucers. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying someone oughta hightail it to the attic and see what’s what.”

I stared at my brother as if English were my second language—or maybe it was his second language. “What the hell are you talking about?”

I didn't bother to wait for his answer—he wasn't making any sense so I left. Every step in those weighted boots was punctuated by my mantra—*He can't leave. He wouldn't*. When my foot hit the bottom stair, Ryan's hand clamped my shoulder.

“Whoa.” He spun me around and the festooned railing chimed with ringing bells. “Before you have a meltdown, I have a confession to make.”

“What?” All I could hear was Christmas music coming from the parlor. They were singing again and somewhere on the fourth floor of this rambling house, Caleb was leaving.

“First, I want to give you something.” I fully expected him to give me a bottle

of lube or pack of ribbed condoms. Unprecedented, Ryan took my hand. “You’re freezing.” He laid something in my palm and grinning like an idiot, my brother said, “Secret Santa delivery service. Merry effing Christmas.”

“What the hell is this?” Mistletoe. Delicate and green. Tied with a sheer silver ribbon. I stared in confusion at my brother.

“This is your Christmas present. I wanted to give you something you’d never give yourself. A second chance. I knew about you and Caleb. My God, you fooled around four inches from my room. I figured love was a worthy present for you, so I looked and lo, here he was.”

“Can you just say it plain? Because it sounds like you gave me Caleb Black as a Christmas present.”

“Pretty cool, huh?” He nodded, so incredibly pleased with himself, I could do nothing but believe him. “And I didn’t even spend twenty bucks.”

“But...” I couldn’t seem to process what my brother was telling me. “How did you find him? Here?”

“The internet. We were in the same Fantasy Football league. It was unbelievable. When you said you wanted to leave Boston, after that thing with Keith, I contacted May. She sent me the links for Dr. Shapiro’s practice. She hooked me up with the Realtor and with Evergreen...”

I was stumbling through the information. He’d conspired with May to...set us up? It was so preposterous. So...Ryan. “Are you high? Because this is probably the most insane thing I’ve ever heard of. And...Jesus Christ, Ryan, what if it didn’t...what if...” I wanted to sit down.

“She’s Caleb’s best friend. I found him on May’s Facebook page and she not only knew who you were, she knew exactly who I was. He talks about you. Still. Fifteen years later and neither of you can move on. He loves you.”

Ryan stopped for a moment. He looked away and I swallowed past the incredible lump in my throat.

“If you could see the way you look at him. I’ve never... May and I wanted to

do this for you both. Because you love that guy. You always have. I thought it was worth the gamble.”

“*Holy shit.*” Facebook. I’d changed my entire life on the whim of my visionary brother. I didn’t know whether to hit him or hug him. “Did...does he know?”

“Not a clue, the poor bastard. Just May. She says you were his ‘one that got away.’ She’s so devious I am in awe. Plus, I felt called upon to save you before Mom finds you another actuary.” He poked the berries on the mistletoe and his reindeer horns wobbled. “He’s not your past, Owen, he’s your future. You know what I mean?”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Good. You’re speechless. A little less talk and a little more action. We won’t hold supper.”

And with that, my scheming brother loped back to the parlor, whistling.

In shock, I fumbled my way to the attic. The railing shook as I crashed up the stairs two at a time in my heavy boots. Silver bells and shiny Christmas balls tinkled, and the nutcrackers chattered on the shelf as I hit the landing with both feet.

He was there. Backlit by the flickering firelight, Caleb Black waited in the open doorway of the yellow room. He leaned as if leaning was an art, with one shoulder against the doorframe, and my crazy heart fluttered inside my chest. He wasn’t holding a suitcase or an overnight bag or even his coat. The only thing in Caleb’s hand was the end of a towel. It was clasped loosely to his hips.

He’d taken a shower. His feet were bare and his blond hair was slicked from his forehead. His smile was soft and his voice was pure magic. “Owen McKenzie. I see you everywhere I go.”

I lost a boot at the door, one by fireplace and left my wet shirt and my dry socks on the rug. I stumbled over my big, dumb feet, stopping only to swoop down and take Caleb’s mouth in a searing kiss. I marched him backward to the eyelet-covered bed and snagged his towel and tossed it. And at long last, a real

Christmas miracle—he was naked. “Where were we an hour ago?”

“Right here.” He flipped me onto the mattress, lithe as a gymnast. “Take these off.”

My pulse swished through my limbs as Caleb stripped me of my wet pants. He smelled of soap and shampoo and he’d shaved. His body was still as smooth, but he’d filled out with maturity. His shoulders were broad, his stomach muscled. I rubbed my whiskered chin against his neck until he laughed.

“I missed you.” He straddled my legs and pinning my wrists to the mattress, he slid our palms together until his fingers laced through mine. He wriggled and friction made our skin hot. From somewhere below us, Christmas carols blasted and I knew my brother was sending a message. *Make all the noise you want.*

Caleb’s bush scraped against my stomach and I nipped his chin. “I still can’t believe you’re here. You’re really here, right?”

“I’m not going anywhere. I promise.” He thrilled the utter hell out of me when his tongue stole into my mouth again. “Open up, Owen.”

“Oh...shit...yeah.” I couldn’t hold him close enough as we moved together in a fluid give-and-take, rocking the bed, swinging that canopy of eyelet and cabbage roses. We wrestled and laughed and I wasted time marveling over the difference in our hands, our feet, our dicks.

Things turned serious as he shouldered my legs wide and slid between my knees to seal his mouth around my cock. From somewhere a bottle of lube popped open.

I sifted through his hair, holding him as those graceful fingers strummed the delicate skin under my balls. He nudged an oil-slickened finger in the dark entrance of my body and one minute I was begging and the next Caleb sank two fingers knuckle-deep and stroked my prostate. “So good. It’s so good.”

His tongue worked over my erection. He petted me below and suckled me above and he teased me, but he was the one who broke first. Caleb slipped away and I cradled him until he suited up and pushed inside me.

He's inside me. He's always been inside me.

We were slow at first, moving gently. His beautiful hands dug behind my knees, and finally Caleb buried himself as far inside me as he could reach.

We pushed and pulled, tensed and released—sliding in and out. I gripped his narrow hips, digging my fingers into his perfect flesh, and trusted Caleb to bring me there. I let go. Scrubbing my head into the pillows, my neurons misfiring on each spasm of climax as Caleb bit my shoulder and hauled us through an orgasm so hard that the stars I saw had nothing to do with firelight through the bedding. It was him. I came over him, on him, on me. *At last, at last.*

He kissed my wrist, my neck, my chin and I followed, tasting his shoulder, his stomach, his nape. “I love you. Is it too soon to say that?”

“Yes. But shit, I’ve always loved you—I never stopped loving you.”

We slept. It must have been hours, because when I woke, the clock was chiming from the hall down below and someone had let Jake in. He grunted and dreamed by the fire. It was stone quiet in the rest of the house, and the Vermont wind heaved across the porch until the shutters shook. It was officially Christmas and my stomach growled because we’d slept through supper.

It took two seconds to clue Caleb in, and when I finished, he chuckled beside me. “I can’t believe Ryan orchestrated this. I feel like a puppet.”

“You? He sent me here, months ago, to look at the practice. I bought a house. It was so...”

“Inspired.”

“Exactly. My God. How the hell do we ever top that kind of generosity?”

“We will. By making this work.” Caleb picked up the mistletoe, which was a little worse for wear. “Owen McKenzie. I’ll never get tired of seeing you in my bed.”

“Careful. That’s my token Secret Santa gift.” I was going to have it bronzed.

Caleb shook his head. “No. I don’t think so. Whatever Ryan did, he did out of love. I had your name. I left your present here about two seconds before you attacked me.” He snagged a book off the doily-draped bedside table and laid a dog-eared copy of *The Hobbit* in my hand.

“Open it.”

It was mine. The one he’d left with that last night. *Property of Owen McKenzie*.

“When did you get this?”

“I went back to the house when we were in town—I’m sorry I didn’t spend twenty dollars, though. I understand that’s a cardinal rule. But I can give you cash if you like.”

I hugged him tight. “Thank you.”

“Well, Merry Christmas. And...tradition dictates that you reciprocate. You have my name. I read your list.”

“That’s cheating.” I kept my expression neutral as I handed him his present and it was his turn to stare.

“A new copy of *The Hobbit*. This is perfect because, as fate would have it, I just gave my only copy away. Maybe...you could read it to me?”

“Anything.”

About the Author

LB (Lisabea) Gregg began writing in the spring of 2008 at the encouragement of friends and family. She never once looked back (although occasionally she looked down and tripped over her own feet). 2009 saw the publication of her bestselling Men of Smithfield books; 2010 she introduced her hilarious new series, Romano Albright.

LB is passionate about travel, wine, skiing, visiting friends, reading, writing and all things New England. She's rafted the Pacuare, sailed the British Virgin Islands, zip-lined the jungle canopy, backpacked Europe, and most impressively—she's wrangled three rascally children for over twenty years. She hates to cook; she loves to eat, and she enjoys container gardening. LB Gregg is obsessed with a certain German soap opera.

Lisabea lives somewhere in the Connecticut hills with two lazy dogs, three above-average children and a smoking-hot husband who, thank the good Lord, loves to cook.



Nine Lights Over Edinburgh

By Harper Fox

Detective Inspector James McBride is riding high on the belief that he's about to bust a human-trafficking ring. But just five days before Christmas, his unorthodox methods catch up with him and his world comes crashing down.

McBride tries to concentrate on his new day job as security for the visiting Israeli ambassador. He even starts to feel a renewed sense of self-worth when the leader of the Israeli team, the aristocratic Tobias Leitner, takes a bullet for him in the line of duty. But he can't forget the trafficking case, especially when his investigations result in the kidnapping of his own daughter! McBride has no one to turn to for help—no one, except Toby.

Can these two very different men work together to bring about a holiday miracle—and heal one another's heart in the process?

Dedication

To Jane, whose love of the city inspired me—and to Midge

Prologue

Being this drunk made everything easy. James McBride watched his handsome young partner disappear down the corridor and considered his offer. He took his time over it. No sense of urgency.

“Come on, Jim. If we leave now, I can give you a lift home.”

Jim was a new one on McBride. Normally Andrew stuck to *James*, or better still *Inspector*. McBride, while he’d tried to be a good boss and mentor, hadn’t encouraged that much familiarity.

Still, it was well past midnight, and rules got bent at office parties. This was the department’s informal mid-December bash; nearer to the date there would be an elegant, excruciating police dinner at one of Edinburgh’s more glittering venues. McBride wasn’t sure which was worse. Keeping a smile on his face for social occasions this year was proving bloody painful. At least the downing of large quantities of alcohol was considered acceptable.

Compulsory, nearly, he thought, setting down the plastic cup of screw-top Lambrusco he’d been using to toast season’s greetings to the office girls and admin staff. Andrew’s strong, muscular back was still visible. He’d stopped to chat up one of the secretaries en route. And that was more Andrew’s style, McBride reflected, pushing unsteadily off the edge of the desk where he’d been perched. There’d been a couple of times over the past month or so when he’d caught a look or a smile that made him wonder, but Andrew was straight. Clean living, almost teetotal. Probably sober enough, even at the end of a night like this, to legally drive them both home.

He’d finished with the girl and was heading for the stairwell that led to the locker rooms. McBride followed him, negotiating the concrete steps with caution. Probably the offer of a lift was all it was...

A lean arm snaked out from behind the first row of lockers. A hand fastened round his arm. Andrew said, “Early Christmas present for you, boss,” and dragged him into the shadows.

McBride watched himself in the mirror. He could hardly help it: Andrew had thudded him against the wall opposite the washbasins. What did he see? A pale, dishevelled man of forty, mouth open in shock. McBride searched the image for anything that might have induced lovely Andrew Barclay, rising star of the Harle Street force, to drop to his knees on the locker-room tiles and begin unfastening his senior officer's belt. Handsome enough once, that reflected man, before the streets and the drink had gone to work on him. Still looking strong, stocky, with sandy hair that would have come in the same red as his five-o'clock shadow if he had one more drop of Aberdeen hill farmer's blood in his veins. But now—just exhausted and lost. Eyes widening in comic shock as competent hands jerked his pants down and a hot mouth closed on his cock.

McBride looked away. Never mind the reflection. All he had was his skin and the moment. He looked at his hands, buried in Andrew's rich brown hair. A right office-party cliché they were making of themselves, weren't they? Might as well have taken a tumble under the superintendent's desk. Through veils of booze and lust, McBride wondered what effect being found sucking off his DI would have on Andrew's career. Why the hell was he risking this? "Andy," he grunted, making a halfhearted effort to push him back. "What the devil are you..."

Andrew's hands clenched his backside. McBride let go a gut-punched cry. Straight or not, Andrew had been practising somewhere. His tongue whipped round the underside of McBride's erection and his lips closed tight, a hard, demanding circle squeezing him from root to tip and back. "Jesus," he whispered, closing his eyes. In the red-tinged darkness, scraps of perception and memory flickered like bats round the Waverley monument at twilight. Dull scents of rubber and sweat, locker-room smells at the end of a long, hard day. The last time he'd been touched like this: Libby, who had put as much good-hearted, hopeless work into their marriage as he had. Nearly a year ago, it must be. McBride had been celibate since their divorce.

Shuddering, he braced his feet and fought not to thrust into Andrew's willing mouth. Libby had done her best, and so had he. Ten years of playing it straight, for the sake of their daughter, for the sake of society, McBride's police job and his thundering Presbyterian minister father. To be queer was a damned aberration. Choking back cries, McBride shoved his aberrant cock down Andy Barclay's throat and tried not to die of the hot, drunken pleasure of it. He'd tried—straight, like his father and every good Bible-thumping Scottish ancestor

before him. “God, Andy. Let go! I’m gonna come!”

Andrew sat back. *Prompt*, McBride thought dazedly. Well, fair enough. Five years of getting mentored, protected and trained didn’t add up to wanting to swallow; hygienic, Andy, neat and direct in all he did. His hand closed hard where his mouth had been. Tissues appeared from somewhere. The surge to climax seized McBride oddly—snatched him out and away, flung him to a cold distance. Through the glass and into the eyes of the washed-out mirror man, who could watch himself being jerked proficiently to orgasm but not feel it, not properly. The peak hit and died, dropping him back into his flesh.

Andrew was grinning up at him. McBride, who for many years had stayed alive and employed by knowing how to read a human face, looked back. There was something not quite right about that smile.

McBride let it go. His knees were trying to dissolve, noisy gasps for air racking him. He must have imagined the tiny glint of calculation in Andrew’s eyes. What could Andy want of him? Everything McBride had, he’d given him already. “Well,” he said shakily. He’d have reached down to help, but Andrew was pushing lithely to his feet, folding the tissues as if they were evidence waiting to be bagged. “That was unexpected. Do you... Should I...”

He shut up. *Can I do you any favours in return?* sounded like a bad line from a *Carry On* film. McBride wasn’t used to casual locker-room sex; he didn’t know the lingo. Hastily he zipped his trousers. Andrew was dumping the tissues down the bog. *Please don’t wash your hands*, McBride thought with indistinct fervour. *Don’t make me something that needs to be scrubbed off you.*

Andrew turned as if he’d read the thought. His smile was still in place. He looked for all the world like an uncertain actor struggling to recall his lines. “Er, no,” he said, and McBride clearly heard him swallow a habitual *sir*. “I mean, not here. We can go back to mine if you like.”

McBride assessed him. “You know what, laddie? Lovely though this has been, I think I’m for my bed.”

“Oh. Oh right. Yeah, it’s late. I...I’ll still drive you.”

Halfway down the stairs that led to the underground car park, walking at McBride's side in a good imitation of their usual rapport, Andrew casually asked, "Are you still going out on that Grassmarket op, then?"

McBride gave it thought. Perfectly reasonable question from his partner, wasn't it? In retrospect McBride couldn't think why he hadn't told him about it before. He'd been working solo, but he'd need Andy's help if he got anywhere with the case. "Aye. Sim Carlyle, if I can get my hands on the scaly wee bastard. It's an extortion racket at best. Maybe human trafficking." McBride heard himself with interest. He wasn't sure if the sex or its clinical aftermath had sobered him up so completely. He sounded just as he did on a normal day, coming off shift, chatting to his colleague.

But at no point had he told Andy or anyone else Sim was working out of the Grassmarket.

He pushed the doors to the car park wide. A scent of ice and petrol drifted in off the street. McBride didn't want a lift home from Andy: he wanted suddenly to be in a taxi and on his own. But it was a bollock-shrinking bitch of a night, and by the time he'd fought with fifty other drunken partygoers for a cab, he'd be frozen to the Harle Street cobbles.

Andy was waiting for him. He looked ordinary to McBride again—his usual handsome, laid-back self. Wondering if he'd hallucinated the last half hour of his life, McBride got into the car.

Chapter One

A cold, unforgiving she-wolf of a city.

Not the parts the tourists saw, though in some places the two worlds coexisted, like the vaults, where population pressure had caused the Old Town builders to dig as far below the earth as they had raised their rickety structures above it. Guides took visitors down there—to gawp at grinding poverty safely set two hundred years in the past, though McBride knew men and women who lived there still.

McBride knew his city. He made his way in the grip of a bitter elation down the cobbled wynds that led between the Grassmarket and Cowgate. The back streets were icy, but he did not slip or fall. He knew the glitter side: Holyrood and the Tattoo, the peerless art galleries and science museums of the Enlightenment. He knew the squatting dwellers of the vaults, the tramps and gangs of disaffected kids who scratched out a troglodyte existence there. Even with a skinful of scotch, he knew how to place his feet on the cobbles to be steady and quiet and sure.

The city was his: he had conquered it. McBride knew the underworld network of clubs that threaded the Grassmarket. Some were for the tourists, a bit of spice and vice to titillate the lads on their stag weekends. And some were much worse. McBride, undercover as Archie Bayne, alcoholic and gambling addict, was a paid-up member of the worst of them. Oh, he knew Auld Reekie, who stank high enough to live up to her name behind these elegant, crumbling Georgian facades. McBride knew—almost—from which of the underworld dens Sim Carlyle was trading in the lives of Romanian women and kids.

Fifteen years on Edinburgh's streets, from constable to DI. Many of them happy, while he was pulling off his act as a heterosexual family man well enough. Team years, those had been, shouldering the harness beside Libby, ticking over like clockwork in his Harle Street squad. Then came his promotion. Better pay, plain clothes and the beginning of working alone. Of thinking too much and drinking too much to drown the thoughts; learning too well how to vanish undercover into night. Of Libby growing tired of playing mistress to a

man now married to his job.

McBride emerged from the wynds and onto Castle Street. He snatched a surfacing breath. Leave all that mess down in the murk with Sim Carlyle. There was his city: a river of lights pouring down over the Royal Mile ridge, and above it all, brooding, visible only by its darkness, the root of the ancient volcano. Six days before Christmas, the cold had come down from the hollow sky at dusk, ringing, reverberant, making McBride's blood sing. His pockets were fat with cash from his poker winnings, his mind alight with all the things he knew. He was better off without his team—without a partner.

Without a family. The courts had granted Libby custody of their ten-year-old daughter, Grace. That was natural and good. McBride had not contested it. He had his girl for weekends and holidays, and that was enough. What kind of life could he give her? If McBride still really cared for anyone, it was the brat. She was staying with him on Christmas night. The money rustling in his pockets was destined, of course, for the police treasury—most of it, anyway; McBride was not as particular as he once had been concerning such niceties. All he was thinking as he turned the corner into Usher Close, was whether an iPod or that absurd Swarovski crystal necklace would go down best as an extravagant, unnecessary stocking filler. Both, maybe, though that would piss off Libby something cruel.

“Hoi, Archie!”

McBride stopped. It took him a second to connect the name with himself: unforgivable, because as long as he was in this cover, he *was* Archie Bayne, responding on the instant. It was thoughts of Grace that had drawn him back into his own skin. He turned around. He knew one of the two men emerging from the alley's shadows well enough, or Archie did, anyway. Fitz Maguire, one of his opponents earlier at the Red Bottle poker club. The other man—just a face across the table, whispering urgently to Maguire—was a stranger. He meant nothing to Archie.

No. Before leaning over Maguire, the stranger had glanced at him. And Archie, too drunk and intrigued by his poker hand, had failed to notice.

“Evening, Fitz,” McBride said genially. “Get lost on our way home, did we?”

Maguire took a step into the middle of the wynd. He was a slight man, undermined by decades of bad living. His companion was huskier, but still McBride reckoned he could take the pair of them out. “Aye, maybe,” Maguire said. “Good thing my mammy taught me to always ask a copper.”

Shit. Somewhere in the distances of his mind, the shattering of his cover resounded. Distinct as breaking a glass. He wasn’t afraid. Bitterly angry at his lack of vigilance, but sure he could still walk away. Glue it back together, even, maybe. Fitz might not be sure. McBride put his hands in his pockets, feeling the cash once more, which was probably the little weasel’s motivation. “Not sure I’ve the pleasure of knowing what you’re on about.”

“Ah, come on, Detective Sergeant McBride. Drop your poker face. Wilkie here knows it too well.”

Wilkie. McBride’s good copper’s brain, which until he had started shellacking it with Cutty Sark had effortlessly held the names and mug shots of every suspect he’d ever arrested, struggled to retrieve the information. It came at last, with a burst of wrath for his own stupidity. Malcolm bloody Wilkes, a small-time cardsharp and druggie McBride had put away not once over the years, but at least three times. Jesus, what was becoming of him?

Game was up, then. “Malc,” he said, shifting onto the balls of his feet. Lothian street coppers didn’t get much unarmed combat training, and McBride had seldom had call to use his. His bulk, and an expression of granite severity he could pull down to order, usually did the trick. “I owe you an apology. It’s detective inspector now, by the way. What can I do for you, then, gentlemen?”

“For me, ye can drop down deid where you stand, you snoutin’ polis bastard. The boss at the Bottle says he’ll glass yer ugly puss for ye, if ever you show it down market again.”

McBride raised his eyebrows. That was big talk for little Fitzy Maguire, even with Wilkes at his side. Way too big. Head spinning, adrenaline boiling the booze out of his system, McBride glanced behind him. Yes—two more thugs coalesced out of the streetlights, the chilly fog just starting to crown them with halos. If he’d been inclined to run, his retreat had been cut off.

Suddenly that was fine by McBride. He was not a violent man. But how much easier to shed like a tight-fitting skin all his self-disgust and send it lashing outwards! McBride had spikes inside him, poisoned splinters. One was Andy Barclay, who'd uneasily continued to court him since the Christmas party. Another was booze, which was changing from a tool into a need, and a third was his damned new-broom boss who had noticed. Then there was Libby and even McBride's angel, Grace—the pair of them by their existence obliging him not to devolve any further, a constant silent weight on his conscience. “Right,” he snarled, taking his hands from his pockets and bunching them into fists. He wheeled slowly, facing each of his assailants in turn. “Which one of you bloody jessies wants it first?”

* * *

They hadn't wanted to kill him, or he'd have been dead.

McBride made it to the end of Spital Wynd. Then his left leg gave beneath him, and he crashed into a shop doorway as an alternative to falling into the Lothian Street traffic.

“Hoi,” said the whore who was already in occupancy. “Find your own patch, Charlie Bronson.”

McBride looked up, grimacing. He could hardly see for blood. He thought his kneecap was dislodged. “Do I look like I'm selling my services, love?”

“You dinnae look fit to *gie* them away.” Disdainfully the whore stepped over him, tugged straight her tiny leatherette skirt and resumed her watch of the street.

McBride scrambled a little farther into shelter and promptly recoiled as his hand brushed clammy skin. *Jesus, there's someone else in here.* By the light of his mobile phone—the only asset other than his clothes that Maguire and his mates had left on his body—McBride saw a filthy, bearded face, a hunched-up collection of stick limbs wrapped in a blanket. McBride swore, eloquently and at length. His lips were split and a punch had loosened one molar, but at least he still could speak.

At least he had his phone. He had his job, his status. He was an officer of the law, one of Auld Reekie's finest. And one advantage of carrying on a sporadic,

inexplicable affair with his partner was, if he fell afoul of muggers in the night, at least he had someone to call.

Andy's mobile rang and rang. So did his desk phone at the station. The landline at his flat beeped and went to voice mail, and McBride hung up. He could have told him what had happened, just about. But he couldn't make a damned recording on the subject.

His mobile flashed a low-battery screen and switched off. McBride slumped against the wall. The down-and-out beside him grunted and edged closer, malodorously friendly or just seeking his body heat. Alive, then. You couldn't be sure. Nights like this went like a scythe through the doorway dwellers, the railway-arch denizens of McBride's city.

He was washed up between two of them. What was there to distinguish him from either? He could arrest the working girl, he supposed—or the hobo, for vagrancy. He'd never done such a thing in all his fifteen years, even under pressure from his seniors to clean up the Old Town streets, but it might let him skin back over the fence, the divide. If he had his ID card, anyway. He shook with bitter laughter and began to cough.

“Jesus, Bronson. Will you fuck off for me? You're puttin' off the trade.”

“Oh. Forgive me, Nell Gwynne...”

She cast a gum-chewing glance over her shoulder. “You need a taxi?”

“Need the fare for one first.” Bracing against the wall, McBride tried to haul himself up.

“All right. I'll be out of your hair.”

“Wait a bit. Cabbie owes me a favour.”

She clicked away, miraculously keeping her stilettos out of the gaps between the cobbles. McBride waited. He couldn't make it any farther, and he resigned himself to whatever pimp or pickpocket she would bring back with her. Nearly a minute passed in a blur of cold and grinding pain. Then, astounding to McBride as Cinderella's pumpkin coach, a black cab pulled up and stopped outside the

shop door.

“What are you,” he enquired of the working girl, staggering to his feet, “the tart with the heart of gold?”

“Not a bit of it. A tenner next time you see me, or I’ll find out where you live and tell your missus you like to be zipped up and left in a gimp suit.”

Chapter Two

Eight o'clock the next morning, all the dross and the glitter were gone. In their place, plastic and carpet tiles, and Superintendent Lila Stone, looking across her desk at McBride as if the cat had deposited him there. "James," she began, her Oxford accent making McBride's nerves twang. "I can't say I'm not disappointed."

McBride shifted in his chair. He'd come on duty straight from the Royal Infirmary casualty department. He wasn't hurt as badly as he'd thought—a black eye, cracked ribs and a sprained knee the worst of it—but otherwise he couldn't help but concur. He cautiously sipped his black coffee, minding his swollen lip. "Aye, Lila. Me too."

She twitched. It was tiny, subsumed into a tap of the files on her desk, but McBride saw. Proud of her open, nonhierarchical approach to leadership, Stone. Chisel open her heart, and you'd see the words *transparency*, *accountability* and *equality* carved deep. She liked to call her staff by their first names; invited them to call her by hers. Oddly only McBride accepted the invitation, gravely and as often as he could. She hated it.

She pretty much hated McBride. That much was apparent, if he hadn't already known, in the cold-eyed relish with which she was looking him over. "Would you like to tell me," she asked, viciously screwing her Biro into its plastic top, "exactly what became of you last night?"

I'd rather poke myself in the puss with your paper knife, ma'am. Who the hell had given her one in the shape of a *sgian dubh*? It was the sort of thing a damn tourist would buy. Had she actually bought it for herself? McBride told himself—frequently—he didn't hate her because she was English. No St. Andrew's stickers in his rear windshield. Her narrow-lipped vowels went over his nerves like fingernails on a blackboard when he had a headache; that was all.

"Detective Inspector? I need your report, please."

McBride shook himself. His skull was thumping, not just with the beating he'd

received, but a good Cowgate hangover too. He made an effort. “I was working the Carlyle case down at the Grassmarket. Playing poker with a bunch of Fitz Maguire’s mates. One of the bastards made me.”

“Made you?” Irritably McBride waited for her to quit pretending she didn’t know the term. “You were recognised? Your cover broke?”

“That’s right, Lila.”

A grey morning silence descended. Through Stone’s welcomingly inched-open door, McBride heard laughter, and the rattle and grind of the vending machine. Andy, getting his early fix of tea. Chiming through Andy’s rich Lowland baritone, the voice of the young female officer on transfer from Glasgow. A smart, good-natured lass. Just Andy’s usual type.

“James, you’re one of our finest undercover officers. Please explain to me how you allowed a crony of Fitz Maguire’s to destroy four weeks of man-hours.”

They were my hours. I’m the bloody man; don’t make it sound like I let down the whole Lothian and Borders. But McBride knew he had. His truculence was a frail shield against crippling shame. He clenched his fists in his lap. Sim Carlyle was an evil sod who needed to be stopped. McBride had had a chance and let it go. “I’m sorry, Superintendent,” he said sincerely. “It happened because I was too drunk to notice Malcolm Wilkes in the Red Bottle. I buggered it up.”

“Yes, you did.” Stone opened a file. She sounded less grim—almost cheerful, as if his confession had been all she wanted. “It’s not the first time either, is it?”

McBride blinked. He rather thought it was—or at any rate the first she could know about. Sure, a couple of times Andy’d had to pick up a bit of slack for him, come in and do paperwork McBride had been in no state to handle, loan him a hundred or so to cover a poker debt until he got paid. Still, he didn’t feel like agreeing with her. He opened his mouth to argue, but she was continuing, thoughtfully, running a finger down a page. “You’ve been a marvellous officer, haven’t you, James? One of our best. A consistent clear-up rate way above average for all the years you’ve been with us, though—” she paused and gave McBride a little smile he supposed was meant to be conspiratorial, “—I think we’ll agree my predecessor let you get away with a lot.”

Her predecessor. Amanda Campbell, superintendent, retired. McBride was glad Stone hadn't mentioned her name, because the day Amanda had announced her intentions to quit and spend her late fifties with her other half, Jennifer, was still painfully fresh in his mind. No open-door policy for Amanda. No first names exchanged—not until you'd worked with her at least ten years. She'd drawn lines of authority no one had ever even thought of crossing. She had dealt with things as a lesbian copper in 1970s Edinburgh that would make Lila's bleached hair stand on end.

Amanda had been McBride's friend. "Lila," he said wearily. "My head hurts, and I'd like to change out of the clothes I got mugged in last night. Do you mind if I ask what we're talking about here?"

"Not at all. I'm glad you did. I'd have had to bring it up soon anyway. James, can you tell me whether all the drinking you do is necessary to your undercover work? Or do you do it these days because you can't stop?"

McBride stared at her. She had a pair of cold steel balls on her; he'd give her that. "I beg your pardon?"

"It pains me to say this. Your record is exemplary, but it won't protect you forever. And it's your safety I'm worried about—yours and that of anyone who has to work with you. How old are you now?"

"Why don't you tell me, since that's my personnel file you're playing about with there?"

Stone's eyes glinted behind her reactolight glasses. It was no way to speak to his superior. He wished she'd tell him so. But fear ran under her assertiveness in all his dealings with her, inspiring in him the desire to run rings around her, but also a kind of embarrassed pity. He cleared his throat. "Sorry, ma'am. I turned forty last August. And...as far as the other thing goes, I do what I have to, to get my job done."

"That's what concerns me. This time it didn't get the job done, did it?" She picked up another file, much slimmer than the bible containing the misdeeds of James McBride for the past fifteen years. "I'm afraid I have to tell you, you've been under observation. We've let you run about after Sim Carlyle, but it's been

a kind of a test, a last chance. And you've failed."

McBride watched the grey carpet tiles at his feet. He wasn't really there in Stone's office anymore. He was one tough week away, at a Christmas party, watching his cheery, girl-chasing partner transform into the man who would suck him off in the locker room. He was back in attendance, a wondering ghost, at their few encounters since. Awkward, unconvincing. Andy always seeing to him, reluctant to be touched in return. "Superintendent," he said dryly, a great arid desert opening up all around him. "Can I please ask you who we is?"

"You can, but it's irrelevant. A wrong focus. I've had the cooperation of the department, shall we say. The point is that you need help. And you need to come in off the streets."

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I don't contemplate disciplinary action against you at present, but that's conditional upon your accepting reassignment. I'm handing Sim Carlyle over to another team, and you..." She peered at him, half eagle, half frightened rabbit, over the top of her glasses. "Two things, James. First you help look after Ambassador Binyamin Zvi when he arrives tomorrow. He's a fire-breathing Zionist, so even if it's not street work, it should be plenty dangerous for you."

"Zvi? The Israeli guy coming in for the Freemason's Hall summit?" McBride resisted the urge to hang on to the edge of his chair. He felt as if he were falling. "That's a constable's job. Babysitting!"

"I'm not finished. Second..." She extracted a thin sheaf of papers from what McBride assumed was his personal investigative file. He stared in disbelief. The first sheet was a flyer—one he'd seen every day on notice boards around the building. Counselling services, for coppers who couldn't cope anymore. *And who shouldn't have been coppers in the first place*, McBride had always privately added, marching past the boards about his business. "Second you will enter the therapy programmes being run for officers addicted to alcohol and gambling. These aren't suggestions, Detective Inspector. They're what you need to do to keep your job."

* * *

McBride made a careful track down the corridor to his office. His knee had been efficiently strapped up, and he could more or less put weight on it. If he reached out unobtrusively to the wall from time to time, he thought he would look almost normal. Inconspicuous, anyway, which was all he wanted.

He pushed open his door and went in. There was the same scene he had left the night before: an ordered explosion of files, in which he could always find whatever he wanted, even if nobody else could, a selection of Grace's artwork ranging from the finger-paint to fairy-princess stages, photos of the unprepossessing brat—poor mite, she took after him—at the zoo, the Waxworks (grinning beside their Christ-awful effigy of Michael Jackson) and atop Arthur's Seat. There were the mummified remains of the houseplants Libby used to send in with him from her horticultural business. Everything was as he'd left it. The utterly alien light in which he was seeing it must therefore mean the transformation was in him.

McBride slumped into the chair behind his desk. He resisted the urge to sink his face into his hands. The room's privacy was notional only: since Stone had ordered the HQ refit, walls had turned into glass panels, and each inward-facing office was fully visible from the others. The panels were equipped with blinds, but no one ever wanted to pull them down. Might as well advertise the fact you were beating up a witness or pinching the teaboy's bum. No, you sat up straight, kept your nose clean and made sure you had nothing to hide.

Well, fuck that. Deliberately McBride took hold of the counselling flyer and information sheets, pinched their top edges between his fingers and thumbs and ripped them in two, top to bottom. Then he carefully lined up the halves and tore the sheets into quarters, then eighths. Beyond that, the paper resisted him, so he let the bits fall, a festive wee snowstorm for anyone caring to watch.

He tried to take in what had happened. It was bloody serious, he knew. Soon he would be devastated. But something about the end of his fight with Lila Stone brought to mind how last night's battle with Maguire and his mob had concluded. He'd been getting beaten to shit, hadn't he? Temper and basic karate had only carried him so far. Down on the Usher Close cobbles, a boot driving into his gut. Others poised, ready for his face and his groin. Then...it had stopped. At the time McBride had been too sick to register the suddenness with which it had all gone away. He remembered now. He also remembered Fitzy's last words, flung back at him like a well-aimed gobbet of spit: "*Watch yersel*",

copper! Ye're in deeper waters than ye know. Next time yer troubles might follow ye home!"

A cold grey fear touched McBride. *Home* meant the shabby flat where he had lived, or camped out, for the past year, not the nice little semi in Corstophine where Libby was bringing up their kid.

Then, if he had been too drunk to remember Malcolm Wilkes, what else might McBride have forgotten? And why had Wilkie and Fitz Maguire run?

He lurched to his feet. There was Andy Barclay, still passing the time of day with the new female transfer. What was she called? Janice, wasn't it? McBride studied the pair of them. They were almost comical, almost a bloody cliché. Andy, tall and handsome, gesturing around, displaying his kingdom; Janice smiling up at him, all soft hair and curves. Adam and Eve at the watercooler. An odd pain passed through McBride. He had never been in any danger of losing his heart to his partner, but what the hell had made him think for one second Andy could ever feel for him the way he did for even this most casual female acquaintance?

Time for the truth. The fragile glass walls hardly rendered it necessary, but if anyone deserved a short, sharp shout... McBride swung his door open wide. "Andy!" he barked and saw with satisfaction that the young man left a good inch of clear air beneath his soles.

* * *

"Where were you, then?"

Andrew halted en route to his accustomed chair. After the initial yell, McBride had gestured him into his office courteously enough. "Where was... When, sir?"

Back to sir, then. McBride, too stiff to make it to his seat, settled on the edge of the desk. *Sir* was for transparent working days and glass panels. Andrew, obedient to Stone's preferred office policy, had left the door open behind him. "Close that," McBride told him genially. "While you're on, pull the blinds down."

"Um...the blinds?"

“My God, is there an echo in here? Yes, Andy. The blinds and the door. Then come and sit down.” McBride waited until his partner had gingerly obeyed. No secrets in Harle Street, except the ones Lila Stone wanted kept herself. “Where were you last night? Around half twelve, is when I’m interested in. Just after I’d got duffed in by Fitz Maguire and three of his lads.”

“Yeah, I...I heard. I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

“You *heard*?” McBride ran his hands through his hair. His fingers caught: there was still blood in it. “Right. Yes, I’m okay. A Grassmarket hooker gave me the cab fare to hospital. Tell me, laddie...” He paused, waiting until Andrew’s attention was fixed on him with painful intensity. “Tell me. I know things have been weird with us for the past week or so. But...have I got something enormously wrong here? Have you and me not been friends?”

“What?” Andrew almost fell off his chair. McBride almost took pity on him. He’d come in with a mask of smiling bravado, but that had evaporated, the face behind it pale and dismayed. “No, sir! I mean, of course we have. You’ve been...” He tailed off, as if formulating the thought was making it freshly true for him. “You’ve been a great boss. The best.”

“Then...Andy, why, for the love of God, have you let that little tin-pot dictator pull your strings like this? She set you to watch me, didn’t she?”

Andrew swallowed. “She told you?”

“No. *You’re* telling me. And that’s good, because if you lie to me now, we really are screwed. Why?”

“She’s been worried about you. So have I. You must know things have been getting out of control.”

“Nice. Also bullshit. Come *on*! You’re better than this. More bloody honest, anyway. What did she do to you?”

Releasing an explosive sigh, Andrew leaned forward. He thrust back his fringe. McBride wondered if he recognised in himself the signs of a suspect about to crack under interrogation: certainly McBride had taught him well enough what to look out for. “Jesus. You don’t know what she’s like.”

“I bloody do, you know.”

“First of all she said she was lining me up for promotion. I’ve been waiting ages, James. And my mam needs private nursing now, not that shitty council place.”

“I know she does. I’ve been recommending you—not because of that. Because you deserve it.”

“Don’t,” Andrew said bitterly. “I don’t deserve anything. I fell for it. She told me you were going down, and you were likely to take me with you. That you were old-school police, and I was the new breed, part of an elite task force she’s putting together. Then she said I’d be doing you a favour by keeping an eye on you—saving your life, maybe.”

“Right. So last night you...”

“I followed you down to the Grassmarket. She’d told me not to interfere, just keep tabs on you. And when you got jumped by Maguire’s lot, I...”

“You let it happen.”

“Yeah. I thought—anything that scared you off or took you out of action for a bit had to be good for you. Then it looked like they were gonna kill you, so me and Janice scared them off.”

“Oh, great. Janice too.”

“Yes. Stone’s had us working together. She’s...”

“Another recruit for Team Lila. All right.” Wearily McBride stood. Against the wall there was another desk chair. He took some files and a dead plant off it and sat down, wheeling it a yard or so across the floor so he was face-to-face with his partner. Almost knee to knee. “I understand all this, Andy, just about. But what the *fuck* made you think it was a good idea for us to start shagging?” Andrew, who had gone through a few more shades of pale as McBride closed in, actually squirmed in his seat. “I assume that was under orders too. You poor bastard. It must have been killing you.”

“Oh God.” Andrew pressed a hand to his mouth and looked at McBride unhappily.

“Lila—Superintendent Stone, I mean—she told me to get closer to you. I told her we *were* close. So she asked me what I really knew about you, and I realised there wasn’t all that much.”

“What? I’ve told you as much as—”

“As you ever tell anyone. Right. But I’ve been your partner, James. You do know the first I heard about your bloody divorce was when you asked me to pick you up at your new flat instead of in Corstophine? Anyway, Stone wanted to give the Sim Carlyle job to somebody else, and she reckoned you were holding back in your reports.”

“Bloody hell. Don’t tell me the pillow talk was her idea.”

“No. It was...it was mine. I remembered that story you told me about Lowrie and how much you missed having a friend like that, and...”

McBride froze. He felt blood drain from the surface of his skin. Fitz Maguire’s boot had not taken the air so thoroughly out of his lungs. “Lowrie?” he echoed after a few seconds. “What the hell do you know about Lowrie?”

“Oh Christ, James—what you told me! You were leathered, but not so bad I thought you wouldn’t remember. About how he came to your father’s Sunday Bible class, and the pair of you used to sneak off into the hills afterwards and—”

“Barclay. Shut up.”

“Sorry, sir. I just—”

“No. I really mean it. Shut up.” McBride pushed his chair back. That got him near to the door, near enough that he could reach to pull it open. That was good. He wasn’t sure he could stand. “Get out of here. Please.” From the corner of his eye he saw Andrew get to his feet. He didn’t look at him—remained where he was, one hand on the door, waiting.

Andrew came to a halt beside him. His hand twitched, as if he wanted to reach out to McBride’s shoulder. “It wasn’t killing me,” he said quietly. “What we did.

It was fake, but...it was no bloody hardship.”

“Andrew, get out of this room now. Or something very bad is going to happen.”

Chapter Three

A life turned upside down, and a new world to go with it. Stepping into the brilliant December morning outside Harle Street, McBride tried to link himself with the flash, arrogant bastard who had swung his way out of the Red Bottle the night before. But he couldn't make the connection. He skidded on the ice outside the HQ building. Same feet—same shoes and socks too, unfortunately—as had found such firm grip on the wynds.

McBride would have said he hadn't thought about Lowrie in years. Lowrie was a flicker of sunlight, a bright stretch of barley-field freedom in a childhood otherwise narrow and dark. He'd appeared in Pastor McBride's congregation, a pair of defiant blue eyes, dragged there in the wake of his devout family. He and James had got away with edifying nature walks in the hills on those Sunday afternoons, almost a half year's worth, until the pastor's gamekeeping neighbour had caught them through the sights of his rifle, rolling naked together on the banks of Loch Beithe. The pastor didn't believe in corporal punishment, but his son had wished fervently, in the silent months of ostracism that had followed, that the old man would just lash the hide off him and get it out of his system.

Why the hell would McBride have wanted to get pissed and spill his guts to Andrew about that?

Carefully he picked his way down the long slope that led from Harle Street into the city centre. Stone had suggested—by internal email, as if seeing him again would have killed her—he take the day off. McBride had no intention of doing that, but he'd be glad to go home long enough to shower and change. One benefit of his new life was being able to walk to and from work, though he'd scarcely thought about that when he'd left the house in Corstophine, just answering the first accommodation ad he'd seen in the *Lothian Gazette*. No, he wasn't about to sit around his three-room flat and contemplate the shadow that remained of the man he'd been the night before. Or think about Lowrie, for that matter, or Andrew Barclay or an alcohol habit that had escalated to fits of amnesia. And he wasn't about to give up the Sim Carlyle case. Washed, dressed and with a pint of coffee inside him, he would not be such a pushover for Lila Stone.

He turned the corner onto Princes Street and joined the stream of the crowd. The vast thoroughfare was crowded even at this hour, five days before Christmas. Normally McBride loved Edinburgh on mornings like this. The fantastical architecture, granite and russet sandstone, appeared to best advantage under frosty northern light, solid and shimmering all at once, Gothic gossamer. On such mornings you could almost believe the city was the wealthy, bustling capital depicted in the brochures. Those vagabonds and *Big Issue* vendors as had survived the night had not yet reached their stations, and the boarded-up windows showing that not even the Empress of the North was proof against recession were not so obvious.

McBride slowed up to admire, as he always did, the elegant Georgian bulk of Templeton's. No sale signs or concessions to straitened purses in these windows: the place sailed on, a lonely luxury cruise ship amidst the scrambling dinghies. Doomed, most probably, though McBride hoped not. He never shopped there himself, visiting only to give Grace a high-tea treat or to meet with Libby on neutral ground.

He stopped dead. An American tourist cannoned into him from behind and apologised profusely. "It's all right," McBride said absently and stepped aside into one of the sumptuous revolving-door foyers. Yes, Libby. Meetings here to discuss McBride's child support or Grace's erratic progress at school. McBride remembered a phone call he'd taken in the office the morning before. Libby seldom bothered him at work, but she'd been worried—about what, she wouldn't say, only asking him to come for coffee at the store at...

He glanced at his watch. For once fate had worked to his advantage, putting him here at ten a.m. He'd certainly have forgotten otherwise, adding to Libby's long list of his crimes. He smiled wryly, pushing through the oak doors into the heady mists of the perfume hall. For once in his life he'd be a little early.

* * *

Of course she was there and waiting, her slim form erect at a table in the baroque tea hall. As always on first sight of her, McBride remembered why she'd woken him from his years of shocked, cold impotence after Lowrie's forcible expulsion from his life. A true flower of Scotland, his Libby, a green-eyed, sable-haired beauty. A nature as earthy and resilient as her exterior was frail. She was and

always had been way too good for him. Picking a route through the elegant forest of gilded chairs, McBride saw her lift a hand in greeting. No matter what they came here to discuss, she usually managed to raise a smile for him.

Her expression changed. For a second McBride was puzzled. Then he recalled he'd been gathering similar looks all the way up from the ground floor, from security staff and the poor souls employed to squirt perfume samples onto unwilling passersby. The hospital had scrubbed and stitched him, but he supposed his bruising was coming on quite well.

"Jim!" Libby was somehow at his elbow. McBride hadn't even seen her move. Her handbag was abandoned on the table. She seized his arm and marched him back the way she'd come: McBride realised, with a rumble of amusement, she was trying to shield him. "What the devil happened to you?" she hissed, tucking him as far back as he would go into the tea room's shadows. "Did you get hit by a car on the way here? My God, Jimmy—are you *drunk*?"

"Of course not. I—"

"And just what do you think *you're* looking at?"

McBride blinked. But that wasn't aimed at him: Libby was glaring off over his shoulder, her green eyes gone cold as Medusa's. Involuntarily glancing across the room, he saw he'd attracted the attention of a group of highly glossed Edinburgh ladies-who-lunch at a table behind them. That was Libby—reserved the right to tear her kid or her ex into shreds, but God help anyone else who tried. "Leave it, Libs," he said uncomfortably. "It's all right."

"It's damn well not. Aye, I do mean you Armani army cadets over there—just drink your skinny lattes and keep your eyes to yourself."

"Libby, sit *down*."

She obeyed, breathless, cheeks bright pink. McBride looked at her in admiration.

"*Armani army cadets*?"

"Well, the nosy old bints..."

“Cool down, you Glasgow street urchin. However did you get a visa to a civilised nation like Auld Reekie?”

“Shut up. Don’t you start on me, James McBride. You’re no’ funny, and—” she lowered her voice, “and you stink of booze. What’s going on?”

“It’s from last night. I haven’t been home.”

“Oh, that’ll be right. Well, at least you’re honest about it these days.”

“No, I mean...”

“Never mind what you mean.” The waitress who’d been approaching the table caught Libby’s look and veered off. “In a way this makes things easier. Amanda’s right—you are totally out of control.”

“Wait.” McBride leaned forward stiffly, resting his elbows on the spindly table. “You spoke to Amanda? My ex-boss Amanda?”

“Also our child’s godmother Amanda, and if you didn’t want her to take an interest, you shouldn’t have bloody asked her. And she spoke to *me*.”

“Libby—Amanda’s retired. She has no idea what’s going on at Harle these days.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. Unlike you, she doesn’t alienate everybody she meets. People like to talk to her. She knows all about your nighttime jaunts, and your sleazeball friends, and the drinking, and going after that racketeer Sim—”

“Quiet!” McBride glared at her. “What are you on about? What’s easier?”

“Jim, I simply can’t have Gracie exposed to all this. I spoke to my solicitor yesterday, and he says the courts would have no problem agreeing to—” she ground to a halt, shoulders slumping, “—to reduced custody. I don’t want her staying overnight in your flat anymore. And I don’t want her there over Christmas.”

McBride shook his head. He felt as if she’d punched him or chucked her coffee into his lap. “Tell me you’re kidding.”

“No. I’m dead serious. She’s ten years old, and...for some reason she still thinks the sun shines out of your arse. Whatever you say or do, that’s gospel law to her. That’s what *she’s* gonna do.”

“Jesus, Lib. Are you saying I ever did anything in front of her to—”

“No, not deliberately! But it’s only a matter of time. I don’t want to go to the courts with this, Jimmy. Please just agree. It’ll be easier for all of us.”

Not for me. Not for me. McBride tried to rest his pounding head in his hands. But the swelling round his eye and cheek made him flinch from his own touch. Suddenly he saw himself from the outside—a filthy, beaten-up tramp. Suddenly he remembered how a crackhead snitch from his last case had somehow found out his address and waited for him on the step outside his flat one morning last month. “Oh God. At least let her stay on Christmas night.”

“Why?” It was an anguished whisper. McBride knew it well: the sound of a good woman at the end of her rope, fighting tears. “So you can blind her with some cheap, flash present like that...bloody crystal necklace she wants? You of all people should know not to make a wee tart of her, not at her age. And then she comes home and hates me because I have to take it off her.”

The presents might be flash, Libs, McBride briefly wanted to say, *but they’re far from bloody cheap.* He swallowed the words along with the lump in his throat. He knew exactly what she meant. He didn’t have a shred of denial to offer her. Grace had been in the flat having breakfast on the day the junkie snitch had turned up. Often she left before McBride did, letting herself out and trotting off to catch her bus. “All right,” he said hoarsely. “All right.”

“Thank you.” Libby got up. McBride was peripherally aware of her blowing her nose on a napkin. In a minute, once she was gone, he would need to do the same thing. “Look at the big pile of snot you turn me into!” she declared unsteadily. She put out a hand and pushed back his fringe. “And look at the state of you... Ah, Jim. Are you all right?”

McBride took her wrist, very gently. For a moment the need flashed over him for someone he could hold like that as hard as he wanted, someone he could grasp with all his strength and never hurt. He remembered Lowrie. They had

only been sixteen, but both built like young bullocks, tough as the heather and the earth where they lay. "I'll be fine," he said. "Best you just go now. Go on, love."

* * *

His flat was on Fettes Row. Quite grand, and more than his salary would have afforded, except he'd taken it more or less derelict and proudly kept it that way. It was a place to lay his head, that was all; a sanctuary.

A badly needed one this morning. Having made the safety of the top step, McBride put his key into the lock and paused for a second, head down. Inside the communal hallway were stairs and a whole range of neighbours he might have to talk to. He needed a moment to gather his strength.

"James?"

He turned round, so fast his bandaged knee almost went out from under him. His heart sank. There on the pavement stood former Superintendent Amanda Campbell, holding his child by the hand. Normally McBride would be delighted to see either—but together and at this time of the morning? Nothing but trouble...

Grace detached her hand from Campbell's and pattered up the stone steps of McBride's building, stopping one down from her father. She looked up at him, examining his face. For an instant McBride thought she might react like a normal child and set up a wail, but he need not have worried. Her chin steadied. "Och, McBride. You look like a bulldog that's swallowed a wasp."

He studied her. She was in her school uniform, and if she wasn't crying, she had been at some point that morning. "*Och, McBride?*" he echoed, raising his eyebrows. "You're spending too much time with your mother. You sound pure Glaswegian."

"And you sound like an old Embra copper."

"Embra, eh? Weegie." A tiny smile flickered at the corner of her mouth. "Glasgae girl," McBride pursued. "Skinny wee Weegie."

"Bulldog."

“Ginger.”

She was going to break any second. McBride watched with pleasure her struggle to keep a straight face. Then Amanda Campbell came quietly up the steps. “Much as I hate to end this touching family scene, James, Grace was picked up for truancy in the St. James Shopping Centre. The officer recognised her and called me. She’s talking like that because it makes her sound tougher at school and means she gets bullied less.”

The child wheeled on her godmother, paling with mortification. “Aunt Manda! I am *no*’ getting—”

“Button your lip, miss.” McBride waited until Grace registered the growl in his voice that meant he was serious. “Amanda, I’m so sorry you were bothered. Why the hell was she playing truant?”

“I spoke to Libby last night. Grace is upset about some changes in your custody access.”

“Aye, but he’s not gonna *do* them!” Both McBride and Amanda turned on the girl, who looked frantically between them. “You’re not gonna do them, are you, Da? I told her you wouldn’t. I want to have Christmas here, and my weekends, and...”

“Gracie. Hush, please.” McBride closed his eyes. No way Embra’s granite bedrock was going to open and swallow him up, but he could pray. Then he looked at his daughter and braced. The one thing that screwed him over with her worse than horrible truths was trying to conceal them. “Listen. I spoke to your mother this morning. She’s right. Things have to change.”

“You...you *agreed*?”

“I’m sorry, love.”

She shoved past him, a white-faced little fury. She was just about big enough to reach the top lock, and McBride watched helplessly while she twisted the keys round, pushed her way inside and slammed the door behind her.

Amanda Campbell regarded the woodwork in silence for a moment. Then she

folded her arms and turned to McBride. Her lean, kindly face and wry smile had seen him through plenty of dark days. Libby too. And, these days, the child: Amanda took her role as godmother in deadly earnest. “Well,” she said. “At least this time she left you the keys.”

* * *

McBride put the kettle on. Amanda, who knew him too well to comment on the state of his kitchen, left him to it. Spooning instant coffee into mugs, he listened to her in the next room, talking quietly to Grace. He listened to his daughter’s eloquent silence.

He took the coffee through. “You’ve given a great deal of trouble to a very busy person this morning, young lady. I want you to apologise.”

Grace, who had been hunched in an armchair, arms wrapped round her knees, uncoiled like a spring. “She’s no’ busy anymore! You always say she’s got nothing to do since she retired. You always say she should never have gone and left you to deal with that yellow-haired bi—”

“*Grace!*”

McBride hadn’t meant it to be such a yell. The windows had rattled. That was all right for the likes of Andrew Barclay and other big coppers—not for his stressed-out little girl. Her eyes had opened, wide and scared. “Go to your room,” he said more quietly. Shit, though—her room, the one habitable place in the flat, was full of Christmas presents waiting to be wrapped. “On second thoughts just...go to a different part of this one. I need to talk to Amanda.”

She took herself off meekly. McBride waited till she had settled on a cushion on the floor and switched the TV on, volume low. “God,” he said. “What a wee plague. I’m so sorry, Chief.”

“She’s freaked-out, that’s all. Christmas with Da McBride is a big deal to her.”

“I know, but what can I do? I can’t fight Libby over this. And what’s this about her getting bullied at school?”

“Ah, you know. Some of the little pigs think it’s funny her mam lives in one house and her daddy in another.”

McBride snorted. “That’s rich, coming from a rabble that probably haven’t seen their fathers since the milkman left town. What do I need to do? Come in and kick their arses for them?”

“I wouldn’t. Just make things worse.” Tucking strands of long grey hair behind her ears, Amanda blew on her coffee. “This is scalding, Jim. Is it real milk or...”

“Powdered. Sorry.”

“She’d probably be dealing with it if things were all right at home. Not you and Lib in wedded bliss—she’s got the idea about that—but she doesn’t need custody tussles going on. It’s unsettling.”

“You think I don’t know? But how can I stop Libby—”

“You can’t. As a matter of fact I think Libby’s right. And your new superintendent too, though—” she hesitated, a faint mischief lighting her eyes, “—though I’m sorry to hear you have trouble with her.”

“She’s a copper-bottomed cow.” McBride frowned. “How do you know what Lila’s been up to?”

“Well, not from Grace. I do still have friends at Harle Street, you know. I heard she wants to take you off your undercover work. I’m very sorry. But if you’re off the streets, and hopefully in less hot water, Libby won’t have to fret about Grace coming to see you.”

“Jesus, Amanda. You hate Lila Stone. She’s one of the reasons you quit.”

“Retired. I’m not ready for transparency and politics any more than you are, but unlike you I had the bloody sense to get out. And...by the way, not that it’s any of your business, but Jennifer and I are finding *plenty* to do.”

“Oh God.” McBride rolled his eyes. “Spare me. All right, I’ll think about it. What’ll I do with madam, then?”

“I’ll drop her back off at her school. I’ll talk to her headmaster too.”

“Poor wee bugger. I’ve got a day off today if I want it—can I not keep her

home?”

“That’s right. Reward her when she acts up. That’ll mean she’ll never do it again.”

McBride groaned. “Why don’t these things occur to me? Am I a rotten father, Chief?”

“No more than I’m your chief anymore. Come on, Jim. Try to work with things as they are now. She’s a good kid, and even that yellow-haired...person at HQ might actually have your best interests at heart.”

“She hasn’t got a heart. She’s got a—Oh, Gracie.” He turned. The child had come across the room like a shadow and inserted herself into the circle of his arm. She was nearly too big to be hauled onto his lap like a sack of potatoes, but he did so anyway, feeling her stiffen at first, then melt entirely, burrowing her face into his shoulder.

“You’re no’ a bad father, Da. Don’t go round saying that, or she’ll cut off the custody altogether.”

He stroked her hair. “Who’s *she*? The cat’s mother?”

“No. My mother. Sorry, Da. I’m sorry, Aunt Manda.”

“That’s all right.” McBride kissed the top of her head. Over it he looked at his former boss, who returned his gaze gravely, as if he were a case whose outcome she could not predict. “It’ll be okay,” he said, to which of them he wasn’t sure. “It’ll be different now. You’ll see.”

* * *

Staying at home had been a bad idea. McBride knew, as the four-o’clock twilight came down, he should either have gone back to the office to wrestle the dragons there or taken charge of his daughter himself. Why had he automatically let Amanda step into the breach for him, escorting the child back to school, seeing the headmaster? Because he was so used to accepting Chief Campbell’s word as law, he thought—and then, more honestly, *No. Because that’s women’s work.*

McBride, sitting at his kitchen table, shook his head. He stared into the golden

circle of his whisky tumbler. He tried his best but remained pretty much—what was the word?—unreconstructed. Did he resent Stone more because she was female? No, that was ridiculous. He'd worked happily for Amanda for most of his career.

But Amanda was different. Even her sexuality had set her apart. Except as a colleague and a friend, she was out of bounds, out of the question.

And if McBride thought about it, he had been out of the question for the straight female staff in the office. Not because he'd been married, although that had been the shield he'd raised when faced with the occasional attack. Because Andrew had pulled his memories of Lowrie to the surface, and McBride knew they'd never been very far down. Because he was...

He stopped short of the word. He wasn't even sure which one he'd have used if he'd got there. His father's cold, clinical *homosexual*, when the old man had finally deigned to speak to him again? "*Do you believe you are a homosexual, James?*" Not by the time the pastor had finished with him, no. By then McBride hadn't believed he was anything sexual at all. And there was a universe, a sexual revolution, between that old hill-farmer world and the brave young things of Edinburgh who proudly called themselves *gay*.

McBride got up restlessly and carried his drink to the window. Across the street, in the elegant housefronts that mirrored his, lights were appearing, women and kids returning from school. Whatever word he used, how grotesquely unfair to Libby his life with her had been! How stupidly cruel to himself...

He downed the scotch in one, unthinking. "Damn," he whispered and poured another from the bottle on the sill. Unless Grace was visiting, there was always a selection within reach. He'd only meant to hold the first one, as a prop, an object of contemplation. He'd packed in smoking on the day he'd heard Grace's fresh baby lungs open wide in their first newborn wail, and his hands still missed their occupation. Yes, he should have gone back to Harle Street. Taking time to think was almost always a mistake with him.

He glanced at his watch. It wasn't too late. He could take a graveyard shift. Sort through his paperwork, make sure the officers who'd been given Carlyle's case had everything they needed. Briefly he imagined how it would be if he

accepted Lila's decree—dropped his undercover work, went to counselling, cleaned up his act. Libby wasn't a hard-liner. Far from it: she wanted Grace to have a father, if McBride didn't keep making it impossible. It could all be pretty easy, he thought, absently knocking back his second double. He'd have equal custody back in no time.

And wouldn't it be grand too, to round off his career with the capture of Sim Carlyle? Sure, he'd blown his cover at the Red Bottle, but Sim had plenty of other hangouts. Just standing here, watching his city's lights begin to shine, feeling them somehow in his veins, McBride had a dozen ideas of how to go about it. A bit of disguise, a new angle...

He refilled his glass. Excitement shot through him, hard and sweet. Lila wouldn't like it, but why should she know? He'd trot in obediently and do his day job, but the city nights would be his own, just as they always had been. He could smell the frost in the air: feel, as if they were laid out through the streets like a pattern of veins, bright red and pulsing, the lines he could follow to find Sim. He could start straightaway—a little reconnaissance, a prowling around the edges of the night. Shrugging into his coat, forgetting his kid and his good intentions as if they had never been, McBride set off into the streets.

Chapter Four

The Freemason's Hall was beautiful. McBride's father had been admitted to the Scottish Rite, and McBride had childhood memories of being shown around the vast oak-panelled space, with its stained-glass depictions of Old Testament stories and its scent of beeswax and books. McBride wasn't sure why the pastor had brought him here, unless it was in some vague hope his boy would absorb Masonic tendencies, the desire for social responsibility, secrecy and ritual, from the air. The visits had stopped after Lowrie.

Yes, a lovely place. And about as unsuitable for a high-security conference as any building in Edinburgh McBride could imagine. There were a hundred windows, shadowed galleries, staircases that wound mysteriously from one set of reading niches to the next. It was practically indefensible, unless you had a small army. McBride paced the top-level gallery, assessing where on its parquet-floored length he would position the men in the tiny team he'd been assigned. All right, he had gone out on his clandestine hunt last night, but he was doing his best to take this new day job seriously too. His head ached almost as much as his injured leg. If he thought too hard, he would drop back into the rainy Livingstone wasteland where another of his snitches had shown him a pair of shallow graves. That was where Carlyle had got rid of his last Romanian girl, one who'd made the mistake of trying to break out of his sex-trade operation. Not just the girl. The second grave held her kid, the snitch had said.

McBride leaned his elbows on the polished balustrade. Blindly he looked down into the light-bannered space before him. There were two Edinburghs, he thought, and he was poised awkwardly between them. A foot in each camp, and as likely to plunge into the abyss as find his place on either side. He wanted to be good—for Libby, for Grace—but how the hell could he abandon the night? He needed to be sure about the graves before he went to Lila Stone with his evidence. He just needed more time.

"Morning, boss."

McBride jumped. He had to pull himself together. If Andrew Barclay, with his big feet and lack of talent for concealment, could appear at his elbow like this, a

hostile gunman would have no trouble. “Morning,” he said cautiously. He had no idea what terms he and his partner were on. If Andrew was even his partner anymore—he hadn’t been assigned to the Zvi op, as far as McBride knew. “Wasn’t expecting to see you here. Has Lila got no elite-task-force stuff for you today?”

The instant the sarcasm was out, he was ashamed. Andrew blushed hard. “She might have done,” he said, leaning on the balustrade too. “Only I lost my rag with her a bit yesterday after you left. I didn’t have to do the things she told me, but...she didn’t have to play me like that either, the manipulative cow.”

McBride gave a low whistle. “Is that what you told her?”

“Not exactly. She’d be wearing my bollocks for earrings. As it was, I said enough to get myself busted down to this gig. I’m sorry, James.”

McBride wasn’t sure what he was apologising for. Turning up here, maybe, and obliging McBride to work with him, which he couldn’t imagine doing—not the way they used to, side by side, shoulder to shoulder. Maybe it was for picking up a drunken confession of McBride’s and using it to bait his honey trap. McBride almost smiled. Although handsome as ever, Andrew this morning looked so ordinary, so...*straight*, McBride couldn’t imagine how for one minute he could have been deceived.

He didn’t know if he forgave him. And there was room for forgiveness on Andrew’s part too. Uncomfortably McBride thought about all the times he’d asked—no, ordered—the lad to cover for him. The undone paperwork, the loans... He shook himself. Best to lay it aside if he could. “Forget it,” he said. “What are we gonna do about this place, then? Zvi’s gonna be like a goldfish in a barrel.”

Andrew glanced at him, evidently relieved to have the conversation turn back to work. “Aye. I did try to tell her, but she wasn’t having any.”

“What—Lila chose this place? What’s wrong with the International Conference Centre?”

“Doesn’t show off her nation’s full historical glories, does it? She’s convinced

this place is safe. You know, I heard...”

“What?”

“That she was one. A Mason, I mean.”

McBride pressed his lips together. *Surely you mean a Masonette*, he wanted to say. But he was beginning to see why every female in his life, apart from a ten-year-old and a lesbian, was at odds with him. He settled for, “Wouldn’t surprise me,” in a tone as neutral as he could manage.

“No, me neither. She has the look of a grand mufti.”

McBride snorted helplessly. “Jesus, Andy. You’re meant to be the new breed. You’ll never get back into Stone’s Scottish SWAT with cracks like that.” He straightened. “Come on. Let’s scope out this goldfish bowl and see if we can’t keep Lila’s ambassador alive for her.”

* * *

They did their survey efficiently, but it took longer than McBride had expected. He wound up at their start point sooner than Andrew, aware that at every stage where he had expected to see him—across the hall on the same gallery level, checking out the mirroring pattern of staircases—he had not been there. It wasn’t Andrew’s fault. Not McBride’s either, for being always a few steps ahead or behind. They just couldn’t read each other anymore.

It didn’t take a lot, McBride knew, to destroy a partnership’s rapport. Andrew didn’t meet his eyes, coming to join him by the balustrade again, and the silence between them was heavy. “It doesn’t look too bad,” McBride offered. “I don’t have enough men really, but with you here too, and Zvi’s people...”

The outer doors of the hallway rattled and flew open. Instinctively McBride spun in the direction of the noise. Here came the ambassador’s security cortege, as if summoned by his words, in full parade order: six of them, sweeping in pairs into the hall. McBride watched, partly in admiration, partly amusement, as they took up positions around the room, so precisely you could have measured equal distance between them from the tip of one polished leather toe to the next. They were quietly and immaculately suited. All toned, neat, dark, they looked like a band of brother princes. He wondered what they’d make of his team, his motley

Celts and Vikings.

A seventh man entered. Unlike the rest, his head was down. He crossed the floor slowly, as if lost in thought. Roughly in the centre of the hall, where the stained glass turned the light sapphire, he stopped and looked up.

His gaze locked to McBride's. There was no drama in the moment. In fact it felt quite ordinary. As if he had got up that morning, come to the Freemason's Hall and carried out his duties, purely for the purpose of ending up in this gallery in time to meet a pair of brown eyes.

They were warm and full of questions. McBride felt his lips part as if he would answer—his heart, which despite his abuses normally thudded along stolidly about its business, lurch to a faster tempo. His palms dampened on the gallery rail. And still it didn't feel awkward to be staring at a stranger. He said softly to Andrew, "Who the hell's that?"

It took Andrew a moment to answer, as if somehow he could be unsure who McBride meant or had somehow failed to notice him. "Who, the guy on his own there? That's Zvi's security chief. Leitner, I think he's called. He's Mossad."

"Mossad?" McBride echoed. The man in the hall had pushed his hands into his pockets, tipped his head to one side. The blue light falling on his aristocratic face brought out his skin's warm olive tone. His hair and his eyelashes caught and split the weird radiance, black as raven's feathers blowing in the wind on Holyrood's hills. McBride drew a deep breath. He had no idea what was making his head spin. Carefully he smoothed a tremor from his voice. "What's a Mossad agent doing on a milk run like this?"

Andrew had come to lean close beside him. McBride felt him shrug and suppressed a flinch. He didn't want to be touched or distracted. "Maybe the same thing we are," Andrew said. "I heard he was involved in some god-awful fuckup in the West Bank. Some kind of hostage rescue that backfired. His partner was killed."

"What—so he got busted down to a gig like this, as you'd put it?"

"Aye, maybe. I heard they wanted him out of the way for a bit while the

investigation went on.”

McBride stopped listening. The Mossad agent—*Leitner*, McBride said to himself, his mind trying out the delicate, exotic name—had begun to smile. It was very faint, but undeniable. McBride’s pulse geared up another notch. A strange heat sprang up in him, beginning in his gut, an inch or so under his navel, spreading to his solar plexus and a point behind his breastbone. His throat. Oh God, a sweet spot just up and back from his balls, halfway to his...

“James? Are you all right?”

“What? Yeah.” McBride drew a deep breath and glanced at Andrew. When he looked down again, Leitner had turned away. *Just as well*. He would have to stay here, pressed safely against the balustrade, until he was sure this stranger’s bizarre effect on him hadn’t culminated in a noticeable erection. “I’m fine.”

“Doesn’t look like he’s any happier with this place than we are.”

McBride watched Leitner make his way back towards the door. Now their eye contact was broken, McBride was at a loss to know what had seemed so extraordinary about him. He was tall and broad shouldered and his suit had probably cost more than McBride’s flat, but he was just a man. A tired one, from the look of him, and anxious. McBride listened while he gathered his men around him. Snatches of what he assumed was Hebrew drifted up to him. He didn’t need to understand it to know what was bothering Leitner. He nodded in amusement as the agent gestured to the exact same places from which McBride was afraid an attack could come.

“Aye. For the right reasons. Will we get the chance to brief with them?”

“Lila wants us here two hours before kickoff tonight. They’ll be here as well. Oh, er, James—one more thing...”

McBride straightened. He looked at Andrew in suspicion. “What?”

“Plain clothes tonight is...traditional. She wants us to blend in with the hall’s hospitality staff.”

“Andrew, the staff here wear—”

“Full kilt and shoulder cloak. Yes.”

“Oh, you are fucking *kidding* me.”

“Afraid not. She’s very keen. Hired the very best from McCalls. Done her research too—got you your McBride green-and-blue, from the Clanranald—”

“Thank you. I *know* what my clan tartan is.” It was a decent idea to have him and his lads looking like harmless prats instead of plainclothes coppers, but he couldn’t help but wonder if Lila had come up with it as a subtle form of punishment. He’d worn his tartans twice in his life before—once at his wedding and once when some of the Harle Street police had been asked to march with the Tattoo. Both occasions had been torture. “Where am I supposed to hang my bloody gun?”

Andrew chuckled. “Well, that’s up to you. But I gather she’s ordering weskits and jackets long enough to hide a shoulder harness.”

McBride sank his face into his hands. “Brilliant. The woman’s thought of everything.”

* * *

The changing rooms were crowded. McBride supposed he should be grateful they’d been assigned facilities separate from those of the staff, the horde of little cocktail shakers heading off about their duties in full fake ceremonial, a uniform tartan never dreamed of by the Highland chiefs. If Lila was making some kind of point to him about becoming part of a team again, she couldn’t have chosen a more direct way to do it. From his position on the bench, struggling with his shoelaces, McBride could see parts of his colleagues seldom exposed in cultures that did not include a skirt in their national dress. He repressed a smile. It was enough to put a man off. And that would be grand, wouldn’t it—cure him, straighten him out and send him home to Libby with a hard-on.

At least his gear was authentic. Standing, McBride adjusted the heavy, groin-shielding sporran to its proper place and settled the hang of the cloak over his shoulder. All that was missing was the *sgian dubh* in his sock. Unlike Lila Stone, he had a real one, a gift from his grandfather, which looked like it might still have Sassenach blood on its blade. But these were meant to be peace talks, and all parties were forbidden the display of conspicuous weaponry. Ironical, McBride

thought, since he was carrying a Walther P99 in his holster. Ironical, that the few times he'd ever had to carry a weapon on duty were at peace talks.

"Boss?" McBride looked up. There was Andrew, who'd fought his way to the full-length mirror and was struggling with his cloak brooch. He'd already spiked himself in the thumb, from the look of things. "Are you any hand at fastening these wee bastards?"

McBride was, but more from dealing with Grace's nappy pins and little frocks over the years. He slid Andrew's pin home with the absentminded tenderness he'd brought to those tasks, then tidied the ruffles of his shirt and stepped back, patting him once on the shoulders. Andrew looked the real deal, of course. Resplendent in his Barclay yellow and black. Poster boy for the Lothians tourist board...

Tears in his eyes. McBride frowned. "What the devil is wrong with you?"

"I've been thinking, James. What I did—it was terrible."

"Ssh." McBride glanced over his shoulder. "I told you, forget about it. And don't get blood on that shirt, for God's sake, or Lila will lose her deposit." He watched while Andrew sucked his thumb in a gesture he would once have found distracting and which now left him cold. *Christ, maybe I am cured.* "Here, shift over. Let's have a look at these two fine Highland warriors."

And that was no good. The mirror, his reflection in it with Andrew's, recalled straightaway the Harle Street locker room on the night of the party. He saw Andrew redden and was glad he was too tired to manage a blush for himself. "It wasn't all fake," Andrew whispered. "I...I did like it, James. If you want to go on..."

McBride tried to imagine it. He couldn't. And when he tried to recall it, all he could see in his mind's eye was Agent Leitner. He blinked in surprise. Had he even been thinking of him? "Don't be so bloody stupid," he growled. "You're a lot of things, Andrew, but queer isn't one of them. Now, we've got bigger fish to fry than our own tonight, so pull yourself together. How's Janice?"

Clouds lifted from Andrew's brow. McBride let himself cease paying attention

while the boy detailed Sergeant Janice Dee's perfections. There was just a chance that one day he and Andrew might find their way back to normality, to balance. Distractedly he checked the draw on his weapon, that the edge of the cloak wouldn't hinder it. Best warn the others about that too. Best give them the team talk, even though it had been so long he could barely remember what to say.

He let Andrew roll to a halt, then called his men around him. Lila had only given him a handful, but at least they were good—Royston and Davies, both top marksmen, and McKay, eerily talented at picking out a wrong face in a crowd. Three others, all fine lads. He told them all the usual things. That part was easy. To look out for the venue's weak points and for one another. To mind what Zvi's men had said. To make sure no part of their evening's draperies was going to foul up their pull, and to keep their weapons otherwise well concealed. They listened dutifully. They laughed at McBride's dutiful effort at a joke.

And they were polite, which made his blood run cold. Anyone who'd ever stood in front of a squad room full of Edinburgh coppers knew he need not expect to be treated with kid gloves. McBride wondered how much they had heard about why he was here with them tonight. What Lila had told them.

Then, did he really need to look to her for blame? McBride tried to remember the last time he'd sat down with his colleagues. When had he last gone with them to the pub after work? Ever since his divorce, he'd grabbed every chance that had come up for him to be a lone wolf. He realised with a shock that these men weren't his friends anymore. They would obey him because he'd been put in charge, but that was all.

A loneliness seized him. Finishing the briefing, McBride reproved himself. He couldn't have it both ways, could he? Not the camaraderie and the teamwork *and* the dark freedom of the streets. Once they were done here, that was where he was headed. His little snitch had found another link, a better one, between those shallow graves and Sim Carlyle. He could do it. He knew it would be worth the price.

Chapter Five

The doors of the conference hall were open, the early arrivals filtering through. Dinner suits and djellabas, a composite rustle of German, Arabic, Hebrew and Auld Reekie filling the air. From his position by the marble statue of Sir Walter Scott, McBride watched the stream. Diplomats and politicians, that was all. No one walking too fast or too slow, no sweaty brows or overly dilated pupils.

Nevertheless he wasn't happy. He glanced ruefully up at Sir Walter, envying him his stony calm. Where was the unease coming from? He'd barely slept for the past few days, what with his extracurricular activities and the raw-nerved tension they left in their wake. This was just street-fear, he tried to persuade himself. Nothing for him to worry about in this haven of chandeliers, dazzling white tablecloths and champagne glasses adroitly balanced on silver trays. McBride resisted the urge to filch one from a passing waiter, though he couldn't half have used a drink. He'd drawn the line at carrying a tray himself to enhance his cover—another of Lila Stone's suggestions, and he wondered if she'd sat up long the night before thinking up further small twists of the knife.

Speak of the devil. There she was, halfway up the magnificent staircase that connected the foyer with the conference chamber. Locked in debate, it looked like, with Agent Leitner.

McBride hid a smile. If ever a haughty woman had met her match... The pair of them looked like two cats facing off. Pedigree versus moggy, McBride added for his own entertainment, watching. Lila's fur was practically on end. After a moment she turned on her heel and stalked up the rest of the red-carpet flight into the hall.

Leitner did not look as if he'd scored a victory. He just looked bloody lonely. He went to lean on the marble banister, the incoming crowds parting round him. For a moment he lowered his head.

He lost his partner, McBride remembered suddenly. He hadn't properly taken it in when Andrew had first told him: had been too busy falling under the spell—bizarre and mercifully short-lived—of whatever he thought he'd seen in

Leitner's brown eyes. Well, McBride could look at him with perfect disenchantment, but it didn't mean he wasn't sorry. He had no idea how Leitner had felt about his partner, but to lose even an imperfect one like Andrew Barclay would break McBride's heart.

He made his way up the steps. When he was four or five away, Leitner turned, his movement casual but edged. Cop to cop, McBride recognised it. A stranger entering your personal space. But there was more to it than that, wasn't there? Leitner wasn't just a cop. He was Israeli secret service.

And he was ready to jump out of his skin. McBride halted one step down. "What do you think of our choice of venue, then?"

Leitner stared at him. First McBride wondered if he didn't speak English—not that, as far as he knew, Lila counted Hebrew among her accomplishments. Then he wondered why on earth he'd thought this man could be in need of human sympathy. There wasn't a flicker of expression on his elegant face. McBride became intensely aware of himself. He and all his men, even the ones who could carry their tartans, had looked like clowns coming out to meet their exquisitely tailored Israeli counterparts. "*Our* choice?" Leitner echoed. "Did you select this?"

"No, not a bit of it. Figure of speech."

"Good. Because you look like a sensible man, Detective Inspector McBride, even if you are wearing a dress. This venue is grossly inadequate, a triumph of arrogance over experience. I cannot defend Zvi in here."

Nothing wrong with the English, then. McBride drew himself up, resisting the impulse to straighten his skirt. "You have the advantage of me."

"Tobias Leitner." Leitner put out a hand. Taking it, McBride noticed vividly how his own square Scottish one locked into it. How Leitner's tanned grip warmed his. Strange—he hadn't noticed he was cold. "My second has spoken to your sergeant Andrew Barclay. We agree the positioning of your men. Clearly you've identified the same points of weakness we have."

"Aye. The back staircases, the eastern windows and the library stairs that

connect the galleries.” For a moment McBride was too amused by Leitner’s rendition of Andrew’s name—*Bar Clay*, two separate words, as if that prosaic Lowland soul were biblical royalty—to realise their hands were still joined. He stepped back, letting go. “Between my team and yours, we can just about cover it, but...”

“But there are gaps. I explained this to your superintendent.”

“Who told you any risks were negligible and more than outweighed by the splendour and historical significance of the venue.”

“In almost those exact words.” Leitner looked around him, then turned his attention back to McBride. His dark gaze was as steady as the clasp of his hand, and McBride saw kindling in it the subtle fires that had touched him at their first encounter. “Is she a fool?”

“No. That’s the strange thing. But she’s trying to bring police work into the twenty-first century, and—” McBride cleared his throat, which had gone dry, “—Edinburgh’s not ready for it.”

Leitner smiled. It was just a flicker, bittersweet, full of amusement and pain. “Well, I can assure you, neither is Jerusalem. We had better go, McBride. Zvi is due any minute.”

* * *

McBride struggled for focus. The conference had droned on into its fourth hour. At this rate he’d miss the appointment with his snitch down in Cowgate. Restlessness tugged at him, as if he had mice in his bones. He wanted to be out there in the star-shivered night. He wanted the hot wildness of a quart of scotch inside him.

Unexpectedly, what he also wanted was to be laid out somewhere getting fucked. The thought struck him with such force that he twitched and stifled a gasp. He analysed it. Yes, *getting*, not giving. Not with Libby, then. Nor with Andrew, whose cock hadn’t really been in it any more than his heart. Christ, the last time he’d done that had been with Lowrie, and a right dog’s breakfast they’d made of it, though their clumsy attempt had been sweet to McBride, vivid in his memory still.

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, making what felt like his fifty-ninth visual check of the gallery above him. What the hell was wrong with him tonight? Ever since Libby had left him—oh, further back than that, if he were honest—his libido had been a well-damped fire, flaring on command to let him perform his marital duties and not much more. Certainly it never distracted him with sexual fantasies during an op. He was tired. Defences down. He wasn't as young as he used to be, couldn't skip night after night of sleep like a kid in his twenties.

Sixtieth check. This damn conference had to end soon. Even the ambassadors looked bored. Drawing deep breaths, McBride dismissed all thoughts but those of the moment. Sixty-first...

He froze. Something in the fall of light and shadow on the gallery was wrong. Or perhaps not wrong, but just a fraction different. The back of McBride's neck prickled. Andrew was in place up there. If anything was off, he would see it. A glance from McBride would alert him. They had no trouble, he and his partner, in catching each other's eye across distance. Stepping forward, McBride looked for him.

His place was empty. McBride scanned the gallery, pulse picking up in his veins. Finally he saw him—way off, right at the far end of the hall, gazing down like the lord of the bloody glen at the diplomats. Probably dreaming about Janice Dee, not that McBride could really talk.

Quietly he eased back out of the hall. There weren't many places other than the Tattoo where he could wander round dressed like Robert the Bruce and not be noticed, but this was one of them: none of the staff or the Israeli guards dotted about the staircases cast him a second glance as he made his way up to the gallery. No sense in alerting anyone yet. Lila would never forgive him a false alarm.

Which was what it would have been. Emerging on the second level, McBride released a breath. He was getting bloody jumpy in his old age, that was all. The staircase and the doorway were empty. Except for...

Shit. A lean figure, moving at speed, disappearing between one pillar and the next. Straight into one of the blind spots you'd have to be blind to miss. Nobody

had any business up here except Leitner's men and his own. McBride set out in pursuit. He didn't have time to stop and try to alert his partner, but no matter: Andrew had to have seen him, picked up the unusual movement. They would converge at about the right place.

It would have to be soon. Only a sniper would head with such purpose for the end of the gallery. McBride knew this in the way any good copper would who had learned over the years to think like a criminal himself: if *he* were going to knock off Ambassador Zvi, that was the spot he would pick.

He rounded a corner and stopped, staring down the barrel of a gun. Black eyes returned his gaze frigidly. Two steady hands held the weapon at his chest. McBride had time to observe the silencer: it was huge, elaborate.

He would die with a pop that barely disturbed the air. *Oh, Grace*, he thought. A pang went through him, a sorrow, sharper than he'd imagined it would be if ever this came to pass. Somewhere between Lowrie's embrace on the banks of Loch Beithe and this night, he had lost his love of life for its own sake. But he wasn't ready to leave it. Not yet...

The tiny sound came. McBride scarcely noticed. In the instant before it—the grunt, the champagne-cork explosion—a shape had come between him and the gunman. McBride was still standing, and someone had crashed to the ground at his feet. He understood this in retrospect, perceptions running backwards as his hands dealt with the physics of the moment, unholstering his Walther.

He was a decent marksman, but that hardly mattered anymore. The gunman was four feet away from him and taking aim again. McBride's life—his flawed, precious life—had just been saved. He couldn't waste that. He whipped up the P99 and fired point-blank.

His gun had no silencer. In the hall below, all hell broke loose. The effect was instantaneous. Lurching to the rail, McBride saw Zvi being dragged down to the parquet by one of the Israeli guards. He saw which of the other diplomats and staff were also diving. And he saw who stayed upright, reaching for weapons that had got in because Lila wouldn't even have her guests subjected to the indignity of a search. Christ, they'd been infiltrated. McBride counted ten or so, in strategic places round the table and the hall. Frantically he tried to distinguish

the good from the bad, hostiles from security. They all looked the bloody same.

Only behaviour distinguished them. McBride got his first clue when another silenced shot scorched past his ear and buried itself in the venerable panelling behind him. Fine; that cleared things up. Ducking behind the balustrade, he took out the man in the hallway below with cool dispassion. Once battle was declared, what did it matter? There was Andrew, in the wrong place, but alive—for the time being, anyway; oblivious to the sniper taking aim on him from the gallery opposite, who in his turn was briefly oblivious to McBride. The Walther jumped in his hands again. Another good shot, and he could see the Israeli men getting their act together, finding cover and their targets, with the exception of...

Where was Leitner? Who the hell had saved his life?

Oh God. Two questions with one answer. As the gun battle started below, McBride scrabbled round and saw the hunched figure in the shadows behind him. Leitner, one hand pressed to his left shoulder, was reaching with the other for his pistol. His head was down, his face a grim blank. There was blood everywhere.

McBride grabbed the gun for him. “Christ on a boat, Leitner! What have you done?” Leitner took the weapon in a red-streaked grip, and McBride, getting close enough, seized him by the armpits and dragged him into the shelter of the stairwell. “Here. Stay still, stay still. Let me look at that.”

“Why...why is he on a boat?”

“What?” McBride propped Leitner against the wall. He looked for a second into his beautiful, shock-grey face, then turned his attentions to the fist he had clenched against his shoulder. “Let go. Let me see.”

“Christ. On a...”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. It’s an expression.” McBride prised apart Leitner’s fingers and bore his hand down. Blood surged immediately. The fine charcoal jacket of his suit was soaked through with it—the shirt beneath too. Unceremoniously McBride ripped open Leitner’s tie and shoved his clothes back far enough to see the bullet wound, a raw red-black hole punched in the satiny

skin. “That missed your heart by three inches, you bloody nutcase. What did you do it for?”

“I saw your partner wasn’t in place. I saw you look for him.” Leitner grimaced as McBride tore off his cloak, bundled it up and pressed it to the gaping hole. “Oh, that hurts.”

“I know. Hold it in place, nice and tight. You don’t believe in him, anyway, do you?”

“Who—your partner?”

“No. Christ.” It was a ploy of distraction only, something to take Leitner’s mind off passing out from the pain. “On a boat or otherwise.”

“I believe he existed, just not...in his divinity. I’m not a religious Jew—I don’t believe in anyone’s divinity. Do you?”

“Not right now, no.” McBride shook his head in wonder at a man who would pursue such debate with a pouring shoulder wound and crossfire raging over his head. He had to get help for him or find him at least a better hiding place than this, until the battle was lost or won downstairs.

No. Too late. Footsteps scraped at the foot of the spiral below him. Leitner seized McBride’s shirtfront, leaving scarlet stains. “Leave me! Get out of here!”

“Shut up. Ssh.” McBride clamped a hand to his mouth. The man climbing the stairs wasn’t one of Zvi’s or Lila Stone’s. That left only a hunter, coming after his missing colleague. He put his arms round Leitner and hauled him close, dragging him farther into the shadows.

“You’ve got to be quiet.”

Leitner was rigid with the effort to silence himself, face contorted and dampening with sweat. “This is how my partner died,” he rasped out. “He was alone.”

“Well, you’re not. And you’re not gonna die. Shut up.”

Leitner’s head jerked back, his eyes glazing, filling with long distances.

“Avrom! Oh, Avi...”

“Leitner! That’s all over. You have to hang on.”

The desolate gaze found focus and came back to him. After a moment Leitner struggled round and buried his face on McBride’s shoulder, stifling a cry. “That’s it,” McBride whispered, pressing a hand to the back of his head. “Hang on. Not going to let anybody hurt you now.”

And that was a bloody stupid promise. McBride didn’t know why he had made it. He didn’t know why, clutching this stranger in the middle of a firefight, a predator closing in on him, he felt calmer and more real than he had done in months. The Walther had five left in the clip. Shifting Leitner in his arms so that he was shielding him, with his bulk and his ancestral tartans, McBride took a good, steady aim down the stairwell.

Another gun barked. McBride knew it well—Andrew’s, the weapon that sang next to his on the firing range. The gunman making his way up the stairs jerked and fell. Andrew, his face blanched with fear, stepped straight over the body, lurched his way up the rest of the spiral and stumbled out onto the gallery. “James! Jimmy!”

“I’m here, you great clown. Did we win down there?” Andrew stood staring at him, long enough for McBride to guess that they had. The rattle of crossfire had ceased. “Then get a bloody ambulance!”

“I...I will. Oh my God, James. Is he alive? He saved you. I saw him save you. I...”

“*Barclay.*”

“Yes.” He pulled his mobile phone, to McBride’s pained amusement, out of his sporran.

“Jesus, James. Lila’s never gonna get her money back on that kilt now.”

Chapter Six

At half six the following morning, McBride stopped on the pavement outside the Royal Victoria Hospital. A faint promise of daylight was gathering between the streetlight halos. He had made the appointment with his Grassmarket snitch after all, although the poor bastard had been ready to jump out of his skin by the time McBride arrived at their rendezvous, out of breath, traces of blood still on his shirtfront. And the meet had been well worth it. The snitch, a loose satellite of Carlyle's, had heard more women were being smuggled into Leith aboard a cargo ship Carlyle had used before. Driven by his drug habit, McBride's snitch had taken his chances and hidden in a dockside warehouse with a camera. McBride, who could no longer call on police funds to pay for information, had fully appreciated the irony of handing over poker winnings from one of Carlyle's dens so the trembling little man could go and buy drugs from another: half now, the rest when he was sure the evidence was good.

McBride breathed on his numb hands to warm them, stamping his feet. Then he went into the hospital reception. The girl at the desk told him Tobias Leitner was out of surgery and doing well, but visitors' hours didn't start until ten. McBride flashed his badge and looked severe and a moment later was in the lift on his way to the third floor.

The hothouse atmosphere almost put him to sleep before he got there. Cold air condensed on his skin and clothes, dampening them. Padding down the long corridor towards the postsurgical unit, he yawned, pushing his fingers back through his fringe. He'd stopped off at home for a shower and a change of clothes, but he hadn't checked a mirror. He hadn't thought about it yet, but suddenly he wanted to be presentable.

Leitner's room was guarded. McBride saw a couple of Zvi's men and came to a halt in the corridor until they recognised him and stood down. He nodded to them, cautiously friendly. After a moment they returned the gesture, one of them reaching to push open the door for him. Well, they'd walked through the same fire the night before. They looked almost as weary as McBride felt.

Not so, Agent Leitner. Propped on pillows, smiling and chatting to a young

male nurse who looked ready to die for him, Leitner was apparently prince of postsurgery. The unit was one of the hospital's few modern ones; through the glass walls that divided its cubicles, McBride could see a small squadron of staff checking out the new arrival, making sure their aristocratic charge was safe.

He could see the attraction. Leitner wore his bandages like a sash of honour. He looked like an exotic general in his desert tent, wounded but still in command. McBride felt—for the first time since he was sixteen or so—a flicker of shyness. Then Leitner saw him, and his bright grin burned off his imperious air like sunshine on Edinburgh mist. "McBride!" he said. "Are you all right? What are you doing here?"

"Well, I was passing. I thought I'd stop off and check you were okay."

"I am. I've had... Oh, wait one moment." He turned to the nurse still standing by his bed.

"Peter. My friend could use some coffee. Could you possibly..." McBride cringed. He waited for Peter to inform this beautiful foreign despot this was an NHS hospital, and the nursing staff were not waiters. But the boy only nodded and headed for the door, almost bowing on his way out.

"I've had surgery to remove the bullet, and a transfusion," Leitner went on, indicating a chair by the bed. "And...you know, McBride, I think I still look healthier than you. Sit down. What the hell have you been doing?"

McBride considered. He had a whole range of lies and smoke screens prepared to cover up his work on Sim Carlyle. But he was very tired. Sitting by Leitner's side felt like coming to rest. The nurse brought his coffee in and set it respectfully on the bedside table. It was just from the vending machine, but the lad had put it on a tray and from somewhere or other had produced a digestive biscuit. "Thanks," McBride said, sternly repressing a chuckle. "I've been out all night on a case. Bloke called Carlyle. Just a wee junkie and dealer, but he's running a trafficking ring—women and kids from Romania, mostly, for the sex trade. I've..." McBride hesitated. For the hundredth time since he'd surfaced from the Grassmarket that morning, he checked his coat's inside pocket for the digital photo cards his snitch had handed him. He'd only had time to glance at them on his laptop before he came out, but he knew they would do. Carlyle with

the captain of the cargo liner, a cluster of bewildered-looking women clinging to one another in the background. Carlyle handing cash to a customs official on the Leith docks. “I’ve got enough on him now.”

“And...that’s what you did last night, after helping fight off a Hamas death squad?”

“Is that who they were? Yeah, I saw you safe here, and...”

“Your boss must be more negligent and stupid than I thought.”

McBride frowned. Leitner was watching him with a dark-eyed displeasure that made him glad not to be its target. It was strange, to have someone indignant for him. “Well, she’s all that. But to be fair to her, she didn’t know about Carlyle. She took me off the case last week, and I just...”

“You carried on anyway.”

“Yes. I was so close. Leitner, why...” Leaning forward, McBride rested his elbows on his knees. He clenched his hands together until the knuckles whitened. “Why did you stop a bullet for me last night? You don’t even know me.”

A warm touch found his shoulder. McBride tried to look up but found he couldn’t pull his gaze off the scuffed lino floor. His throat was tight and sore, his eyes oddly hot. “Why?” Leitner asked. His voice was very gentle. “Didn’t you want me to?”

“Well, you could have chosen better men to save.”

“Listen, McBride.” The touch tightened briefly, then lifted away, leaving a cool patch.

“I’m only on secondment to the Israeli police. You’ve probably heard that I normally work for Mossad. A few months ago in Jerusalem, the West Bank, my team was sent to rescue some hostages. No negotiation—we don’t negotiate—just a clean sweep-through. And my partner—”

“The one you called out for last night. Avrom. Avi.”

“Yes. My partner and my lover. He was shot. It was...the work of a moment. I didn’t believe in it, for many weeks. Perhaps not even until last night, when I saw you at gunpoint, and...I couldn’t bear to see another good man go down.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” The word *lover* hit McBride on the rebound, like a ricochet. He sat up.

“Oh. You were...together?” *Awful, McBride*, he admonished. So awkward. He felt as if his hands and feet were too big for him. “I *am* sorry,” he repeated lamely. “But it’s still no reason to jump in front of a bullet for a stranger. And I’m...very far from good.”

“If it’s any consolation, I only meant to push you out of the way.”

“Well, next time just shout.”

“All right. As for your goodness or otherwise...”

McBride never found out what he had been going to say. He was looking at McBride with an unearned affection, as if somehow he was good enough—good enough for Leitner, anyway. Those strange appreciative fires—damped down by the hospital neon, but unsettling as hell—were back. McBride jumped hard as the door clicked, admitting Lila Stone on a cold breeze.

“Oh. Detective Inspector. May I ask what you’re doing here?”

At what point had Leitner taken his hand? McBride had rested his on the blanket. He couldn’t remember when Leitner’s had come down to cover it. Leitner was watching Lila with interest, as if he couldn’t quite work out her species. Unhurriedly he lifted his hand. “The DI was good enough to call in on his way to work, Superintendent. How are you this morning?”

McBride turned. She hadn’t sounded at all like herself. Now he came to look, she didn’t look well either. Brittle and nervous. “Well, that’s what I came to find out—how *you* are, that is, Agent Leitner. McBride, as you know, I gave you and your team this morning off, in consequence of last night’s...”

“Cock-up?” Leitner suggested innocently from his bed, and McBride repressed a snort. *Nothing wrong with the English at all.* “Who will conduct the investigative meeting? One of my people or yours?”

Lila seemed to deflate. “Both,” she said bitterly. “My immediate superior and a General Sharot from the Israeli embassy. It’s scheduled for ten o’clock this morning. I have to ask you some preliminary questions.” She glanced around as if looking for something to conduct her fear and shame away. Her gaze fastened on McBride. “I’ll need you there,” she snapped. “You’re a state, Detective Inspector! I swear, if I find out you’ve been pulling unauthorised night shifts after Sim Carlyle... That case is in hand. It no longer concerns you at all.”

McBride got to his feet. He almost didn’t like to do it to her. She looked ready to shatter and fall into unwieldy bits as it was. Twelve hours was fast for the Lothian commissioners to set up a preliminary meet. Something being taken very seriously indeed. “Is it solved, then?” he asked her. “Your Carlyle case? Did we bring the bastard in?”

“What? No, of course not. That case is still ongoing, as you very well know, and I can’t discuss it in front of—”

“Aye. Right.” He reached into the inner pocket of his coat. “It’s just that these might help.” Dispassionately he dumped the small plastic bag containing the digital photo cards into her reflexively outstretched hands. Then he limped to the door. His knee still hurt, and he was exhausted. If he didn’t have to be on call until ten, he could go home and catch up on some kip, and maybe have time to think about why he felt closer to an Israeli stranger than to Andrew Barclay, Libby or anyone else in his chilly world. Why, for God’s sake, he would give almost anything to be back in a shoot-out again, with death closing in and the stranger’s arm locked round his waist...

He paused in the doorway to meet the stranger’s smile, his amused brown gaze. “What do they call you, then?” he asked. “If it’s not Leitner or your rank?”

“Tobias. Toby for short, and for friends. And you?”

“James.”

“James?” The smile became subtly wicked. “I heard your partner call you *Jimmy*, when he thought you were dead.”

“Aye. Well, *he’ll* be dead the next time. It’s just James.”

* * *

The flat was quiet. Empty and cold. For once McBride wouldn't have minded the wail of free-form jazz beyond the party wall—his sax-playing neighbour, in endless rehearsal for the Fringe. Daytime hours at home, the rest of the world about its business, made him desolate. And perversely he was wide-awake. The look on Lila's face as he'd given her the evidence bag, the mix of apprehension and disbelief, kept coming back to him. It should have been a good moment. He'd anticipated taking a good deal of pleasure from it.

But what the hell was he going to do now? Lila wasn't likely to reinstate him because he'd proved her wrong. Quite the bloody opposite. Wondering if he'd cut off his nose to spite his face, McBride slung his coat onto the sofa and thought about an early-morning nip of Cutty, just enough to drive the cold from his bones and maybe knock him out enough to sleep.

Or he could turn the time to good account and wrap up Grace's presents. That was a better idea. She wouldn't be here on the day, but he could make a stocking of the little things and give it to Libby to hang on her bed the way she liked.

He noticed the answer phone was flashing. He hated the thing and ignored it when he could, but this morning the prospect of a human voice was not displeasing. For a second his brain toyed irrationally with the notion that Tobias Leitner—Toby—might have somehow got his number. Climbed out of bed, gunshot wound and all, and found a hospital payphone. Smiling at his stupidity, McBride played the message back.

He didn't understand it.

Yet it was clear enough and very short: "Get back the evidence, and keep your mouth shut, or you'll never see her again." He sat on the arm of the sofa, unaware his knees had given. There were plenty of possibilities. A wrong number was the best of them. *See who?* Maybe someone had abducted Lila, again the best possible option. Why was there cobwebby scarlet mist in front of his eyes?

The phone rang. McBride picked up straightaway. He waited in silence. He knew exactly how to deal with kidnappers. Disorient them by nonresponse, the first in a series of moves you could use to prolong the call and get a trace on it. It

was instinct, that was all. He was a professional, rigid-backed copper, waiting in dry-mouthed patience to hear what he must do.

“Is...is that you?”

Libby. His spine melted. He leaned one elbow on the phone table, resting his brow on the other hand. “Aye. Sorry, Libs. You all right?” She didn’t sound it, but that could be anything—her car broken down or a row with the brat over school.

“Jimmy, tell me she’s with you.”

“Keep your mouth shut, or you’ll never see her again.”

“Libby,” he said. “She’ll be truant from the school again.”

“No. She never got there.” Libby’s voice seemed to be finding him through panes of glass: he heard them shatter. “Jimmy, check her room. She might have got your keys again. Check the street, the hallway. *Tell me she’s fucking well there!*”

The door to Grace’s room was open. Her little bedroom, though better decorated than the rest of the flat, allowed no place to hide. McBride could see into every corner from here. “Wait a bit,” he muttered and lurched to his feet, setting the receiver down.

He stumbled into the communal hall and slipped halfway down one flight of steps on the oilcloth before he could catch himself. His nosy old bitch of a downstairs neighbour was there on the instant—the first time in his tenancy McBride had been grateful to see her. “Mrs. Calvi, have you seen my Grace? Has she been here?” *If you don’t know, you interfering old bat, no one will.*

But she didn’t. Grace hadn’t. And as for knowing, McBride knew perfectly well for himself. He turned—feeling his tired, aching body like a lead suit around him, making him lumber when he had to fly—and began the long trip back to the phone.

“Libby,” he said when he got there. “Have you told anyone?”

“Only you. The school called me. I’m just gonna call Amanda—then my mother. She might’ve gone there...”

“No. Don’t. Don’t call anyone.”

“What?”

“Call the school back and say she’s come home sick. No—I’ll do that. And not a word to anybody else, do you hear me?”

A terrible silence from the receiver. Then a thin voice, a ghost voice, so unlike his round, real Libby’s that McBride wanted to run from it, run and hide himself forever: “This is something to do with you, isn’t it? You and your fucking work. Somebody’s snatched my girl because of you!”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. But you have to promise—”

“Oh, I promise. Here’s what else I promise. You have that child home by dark—whatever it takes, you miserable, irresponsible, feckless bloody sot—or I’ll find you. With a knife between your ribs. Do you hear me?”

The line clicked and went dead.

* * *

Darkness fell at four, and Grace was not found. Libby didn’t carry through on her threat. She was too busy weeping, silently, curled up in a chair in the living room of the Corstophine house, face buried on her knees. McBride stood over her, fists clenching and unclenching in the pockets of his coat.

He had gone to the school first. No trouble there—all the staff knew Grace’s dad was a policeman. If he said she had flu and needed a few days off, they had no questions. He had kept his tone light, his voice steady. He had walked along the route from the bus stop to the school gates, looking for anything—scuffs on the pavement, a dislodged hair clip—and finding nothing. Then he had called in on Libby’s mother and Amanda Campbell in turn, doing a creditable impression of a man calling in on the off chance. Grandma fell for it, not noticing he checked the gravel on her driveway on his way out, glanced at her gate and fence for any trace of frantic nail scratches, for a caught hair or fibre. When he had done the same at Amanda’s house, her keen, kindly face had creased

immediately with concern, and he had backed away from her, saying he was late for a meeting.

Which had been true: he'd sat, blind and deaf, through the preliminary investigative session at Harle Street. The Israeli general had asked him brief, concise questions, requiring only monosyllables by way of reply. "*Were there metal detectors set up at the venue? Do you believe it was safe?*" No and no, and Lila Stone's basilisk gaze deflecting off him harmlessly, and he had been out and home, where another message had been waiting.

"Libby," he said. "Can you listen to me?" He waited until she nodded, a tiny movement of her tangled hair. "I have to keep going as normal. I have to make it look good."

"Make it look good, copper."

"I have to get the evidence back on a case I've been working, and I have to recant everything I've said about it. They're giving me twenty-four hours to do that. Then they're gonna call again and tell me when and where to hand it over. And then we get Grace back."

Libby stopped crying. She lifted her head. McBride looked at her pretty face, blurred with grief. She said, calmly, "This is over Sim Carlyle, isn't it? He's got her."

"Didn't we warn you, copper? Didn't we say this would follow you home?"

"I don't know." Cold fire sprang up in Libby's eyes, and he amended shakily, "Yes, it's about Carlyle. But I don't know who's holding Grace. All I'm saying is...we have to do as they say. Wait, and not tell anyone. He's..." A stone lodged in McBride's throat. It had been there all day, but suddenly he felt it, unbearably massive and hot. He struggled not to choke on it. "He's ruthless. We can't mess round with him, Libs. He will hurt her if we don't play dice."

Libby got up. She walked, spine erect, across the living room and into the hall, where she pulled open the front door. McBride was bemused for a second: had she heard a knock that he hadn't? But only winter night lay beyond, a black rectangle streaked with the season's first snow. *That would please Grace,*

McBride thought—she'd been making controversial deals with God for a white Christmas for weeks. He realised Libby was holding open the door for him to leave. "All right," she said softly as he went to stand beside her. "You go and *play dice*, Jimmy. Get out of this house, and don't ever come back to it until you've got my daughter."

Chapter Seven

McBride spent the night looking out into Fettes Row. The tall Georgian windows had alcoves deep enough to sit in. He pulled the phone to the limit of its extension cable, placed it before him and leaned against the alcove wall.

Once or twice, despite everything, he dozed. His tired brain immediately tried to start dream cycles for him, and in these everything was instantly solved: he heard Grace turning her filched set of keys in the door, and there she was, shamefaced, looking to him to forgive her crimes, intercede for her with Libby.

As he always had. McBride jolted back to awareness. In part it was love, but in part it was the easy way out. Nicer to be her ally than her disciplinarian, even though it forced poor Libby into a game of—he almost smiled—good cop/bad cop.

Snow was catching in the cracks between the cobbles, clinging to the windward arcs of the wrought-iron railings. *If you were so damn worried about the Freemason's Hall*, McBride asked himself irrelevantly, *why didn't you say something?*

But it wasn't irrelevant, was it? Lila hadn't gagged him. He could have complained, insisted on better arrangements. It had been easier to wrap himself up in his tartans and his indignation and let the woman take the fall.

It was always easier to knee-jerk, to react instead of thinking. More than half his decision to continue his pursuit of Sim Carlyle had been a protest against Lila's ban. He could have obeyed her and backed off.

And, had he done so, Grace would have been here. If he listened hard, he could almost hear her breathing through the open bedroom door, hear the little purring snores she began in deep sleep. No. Only the slow growth of frost ferns on glass.

This was his fault.

McBride endured an hour or so of this realisation, marked off in bloodred light

on the answer phone's clock. Then he got up. He hadn't checked his weapon back into the Harle Street armoury after the chaos of the night before. He never normally wore it on the streets, but its weight had been reassuring on his shoulder, after he had turned in his blood-soaked regalia, got changed and headed down into the underworld to meet his little grass. He'd locked it into its cupboard under the kitchen sink when he'd got back, and there it was still.

The cupboard opened easily. Typical, he thought—usually he had to wrestle the key in the lock. He extracted the weapon, raw misery rising up in him. He could taste it. He'd lost his child. He might as well have taken her onto the Grassmarket and given her away. His muscles slackened, and he slumped against the kitchen cupboards, a deep groan tearing from him.

Tobias Leitner had called him a good man. Well, it would take someone who'd only known him five minutes to harbour that illusion, wouldn't it? McBride would soon have put him straight, if he had lived. If he could have only fucking endured to live. He turned the gun in his hands. How many had he fired off? Three? That left five, and God knew he only needed one.

He thought about the one Leitner had taken for him. *Why?* McBride didn't buy his pushing-you-out-of-the-way story. No, not at all: Toby had jumped. *"I couldn't bear to see another good man go down."*

He hadn't seemed like a fool or a poor judge of character. He'd clung to McBride—trusted him, used the shield McBride was offering. McBride remembered his weight in his arms and smelled once again the rich tang of his blood and wondered at the sense of bond that had sprung up in that moment in his heart. As if they'd known each other always.

All right, McBride could die. It would be like him, wouldn't it—seeking the path of least resistance, the easy route out. Leaving the women in his life to take the fall.

He hauled himself off the kitchen floor. He returned to his post in the window and watched the phone.

* * *

There was much less distance between McBride and Lila Stone now. Same

office, same desk, but they stared at each other across a far-narrower chasm. He could almost smell her fear. Or was it his own? “Thank you for seeing me, Superintendent.”

Hearing her rank seemed at once to sting and reassure her. Her face assumed its supercilious mask, the one that normally triggered all McBride’s instincts of mischief and rebellion. She looked wasted this morning, the light reflecting off Edinburgh’s first serious snowfall blisteringly cruel. McBride didn’t suppose it was doing him any favours either, a suspicion she confirmed a moment later. “I’d like to say it’s a pleasure,” she said. “But you look dreadful. It had better not be a hangover, Detective Inspector.”

Thank you, you cow, for opening the door. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. It...it is a hangover, I’m afraid. You must know by now that I have a problem with alcohol.”

“Oh, I’m well aware of that. What I can’t believe is that *you* are—and that you’re telling me.”

“Well,” McBride said dryly, “the therapy must be working.”

“You’ve been going to your meetings?”

“Aye, but not here. Your police ones are for wine-sipping pussies, if you don’t mind my saying so, ma’am.”

Stone rubbed her eyes. “What would it matter if I did? No, I don’t mind. I’m just glad you’re finally getting help somewhere. Do you want me to take you off duty?”

“Business as usual. And make it look good, copper.” “Christ, no!” He forced himself to relax; cleared his throat. “That is....not unless you think it strictly necessary, ma’am.”

“No. No, not if you’re taking appropriate measures. Is that what you wanted to see me about?”

“No. I’m afraid it’s worse than that. My work on the Sim Carlyle case—as you observed yourself, it wasn’t all done while I was perfectly sober. I’m not sure—wouldn’t be prepared to swear in court, anyway—that the evidence I’ve gathered

is all accurate or even admissible.”

“What?”

“I know. I’m sorry. I’ve really f—screwed up over this.”

“McBride, are you watching your *language* with me?”

“Well. Perhaps I haven’t been as respectful as... Anyway, do you understand? I need to rescind some statements and reports I made over Carlyle. I take admissibility very seriously—”

“As do I, and believe me, in ordinary circumstances you’d be in a world of trouble. As it happens, the evidence you turned in last night backs up your former statements perfectly.”

McBride swallowed. It made a sharp little noise, like a bitten-back sob, and he turned it into a cough. “You...you’ve seen the photos?”

“Not personally. But the memory cards have gone to the lab for upload and enhancement, and the preliminary results look very good indeed. Listen—I want Carlyle off the street just as much as you do, even if you did disobey my orders. I’ll deal with your insubordination later, when—” Her eyes became distant, and McBride wondered how the sentence would have ended. *When I’m not under investigation myself?* “—when I have time. For now, let’s just use what we have. And those photos look to me like a sewn-up case.”

McBride tried once more. “I used a snitch to get them. Carlyle could argue entrapment at the least.”

Lila frowned. She shook her head. “McBride, what is *wrong* with you? You’ve happily entrapped this city’s bad bastards for as long as your records go back. Don’t worry—I’ll sort out any issues like that.”

He couldn’t speak. He got up, head spinning, and made for the door. Before he could open it, she stopped him. “I’m glad you can stay on duty.” He turned, trying to look interested, not really caring. “Half the squad’s off with flu, and the Israelis want backup from us to help protect Zvi for the remainder of his visit. I’ve assigned you surveillance with one of their agents. He should be here by

now, so off you go, and...well done, Detective Inspector. Really, well done. Admitting the problem is a big step to the cure.”

* * *

“James.”

It was the first time McBride had heard his given name that morning. He had only just noticed Lila had dropped the unwanted familiarity. He halted in the corridor. It was different when you invited someone.

It was wholly different when it came from Toby Leitner. McBride spun round. He couldn't be here, of course: McBride's thumping head was putting out echoes. Leitner was in hospital, unless he'd died in the night and...

But the man leaning in the doorway to the squad room didn't look much like a ghost. He was dressed with casual flair in an open-necked shirt and a long black coat whose lines emphasised his tall grace. His left arm was in a sling, but even that looked tailored to fit him, and he seemed otherwise healthy, his warm colouring restored. McBride took the breath he needed to reinflate his lungs. “What...what are you doing here?”

“I work here. For today, anyway—your superintendent told me to pick a member of her team to partner me on surveillance. So I picked you.”

“Was it just my imagination? Didn't you get shot yesterday?”

“Shoulder wound. And not my gun arm. It takes a lot worse for General Sharot to give you a day off.”

McBride thought fast. *Business as usual* was one thing; he could find time and privacy to make calls, try to figure out some way of activating his underground network without alerting Carlyle. Stuck in a car with a Mossad agent, he was lost. “I'm glad you're better. Listen—I'm not the best choice of partner for today. There's some sort of flu going round the department, and...”

“Yes. You look terrible. Come with me, though—it's easy duty. You won't have much to do.”

Together they followed the concrete stairwell down into the car park. McBride

hadn't been there since the night of the Christmas party, and his skin crawled with memories. Who the hell had he been back then? He couldn't even recognise that man, whose biggest concerns in life had been the blow job he'd just got off his partner and where his next lead in the Carlyle case was coming from. He must have been sleepwalking. Well, he was awake now.

He was sharply aware of Toby at his side. The staircase was narrow. Their shoulders touched as they walked. McBride could pick up the tang of antiseptic, hospital soap and under it something very subtle and expensive, like ferns and good leather. Also a trace of blood... "Are you sure you should be out of hospital?"

"General Sharot thinks so. I'm good enough for car duty, anyway. Ah, there she is."

McBride glanced dully in the direction he indicated. He was almost past reaction, but a flicker of something went through him at the sight of the massive, purring BMW parked alongside the Lothian and Borders squad cars and unmarked Granadas and Mondeos. The old McBride might have given a whistle and run an appreciative hand over her bonnet. "Well," Toby said, shrugging, taking the keys from the deliveryman, "this will be less conspicuous parked outside the Israeli embassy than a battered Ford. And that's all we have to do today—sit outside and make sure no one untoward goes in. Come on."

McBride obeyed. There was an easy command in Leitner's voice, a trick like Amanda's of making him want to obey and thus not feel ordered at all. Perhaps in his normal state McBride would have found it annoying. But at this moment, undone, unstrung, it was a painful relief to have something to follow. He stood on the kerb, hands in his pockets, adrift.

"James."

Toby was holding the door for him. Shivering, avoiding his concerned gaze, McBride got in.

The car was a warm velvet cave. Leitner had run the heaters all the way across the New Town to St. Michael's and now, parked down the road from the

embassy building, was keeping the engine ticking over. From time to time he flicked the windscreen clear of gathering snowflakes. It was hard for McBride to believe in a world beyond the fragrant interior wrapping him round: a world just three yards away, where old ladies struggled with their shopping on the ice, and a larger world, where somewhere in some unimaginable fucking corner of his city, Sim Carlyle held captive his little girl.

No. Belief was impossible. Not Gracie, who, though she'd had a tough time through the divorce, had never known a harsh word or a blow. Who'd never missed a meal or passed an unsheltered night.

God, what if she was cold? And that was suddenly the least of the things McBride could imagine for her: he leaned forward, imagining them all.

"Are you all right?"

"Aye, just..." McBride coughed his throat clear of a moan of fright and sat up.

"Shoelaces. New shoes."

"Oh. Not because I bled on the old ones?"

"What? Oh no. No, they were hired, like the rest of the gear."

Leitner nodded. His attention was fixed, like a good surveillance man's, on the steps of the embassy ahead. McBride could only see his fine-cut profile. "Was any of it redeemable?"

"The socks, maybe. Don't worry—good tartan's meant to have blood spilled on it. I left Lila to explain it to McCall's."

"Have you seen her this morning?"

For a moment McBride couldn't remember. He blinked hard, rubbing a hand across his mouth. "Yes," he said, trying desperately for levity. "She wasn't her normal chipper self."

"No, I should think not. The general wasn't pleased, to have his ambassador given a new parting the night before last. I understand your board of commissioners has given Superintendent Stone one last chance to prove herself.

She'll be under constant supervision from now on."

A silence fell. McBride tried to recall how his old self would have responded to this news. Laughed his arse off, probably. He couldn't even manage a smile. "Oh," he said aridly. "That'll go down well."

"By the way, there's something I meant to ask. The hospital served me something called *black pudding* for my breakfast this morning. Can you tell me what that is?"

McBride frowned at the change of tack. "Did you eat it?"

"No. Some instinct steered me to the melon balls and croissant."

"You said you weren't religious, right?"

"Right, but I do try to keep kosher."

"Okay. Then don't eat that."

Another silence—awkward this time, while McBride realised Leitner had been chatting to fill a gap. No, more than that—to distract him, as if he knew something was wrong.

Nobody could know, nobody. McBride had to make an effort. "Is Ambassador Zvi okay?"

"His feathers are ruffled. Otherwise he's fine. General Sharot is anxious to meet the officer who foiled the attack, by the way, by picking off that first sniper."

"Oh. Who..." McBride tailed off.

Leitner let go his watchful attitude—turned and frankly stared at him. "James. What the hell is the matter?"

That intense, dark gaze was almost impossible to bear. Even staring at the floor, catching it sidelong, McBride felt it peeling layers off him. Cracking him out of his shell. No, he commanded himself. "Nothing," he rasped. "This flu's

got me stupid, that's all."

Leitner put out a hand. McBride flinched and tried to pull back when it closed on his own. But Leitner's grip was tenderly absolute. His thumb found its way into McBride's palm and pressed him there, sending what felt like a hot cable up his right arm and across his chest to his heart. Involuntarily he looked up—straight into Leitner's eyes.

He couldn't move. He sat with his hand in Leitner's, barely breathing.

"Listen to me, James. My work with Mossad has brought me into contact with hundreds of people in...bad situations." His grasp tightened. "Hundreds of people who look sick with fear in just the way you do now. Do you want to tell me?"

Tell you what? McBride almost tried it. He knew which facial muscles he would have to move to produce an incredulous smile. Instead—and he couldn't remember the moment of surrender, of decision, not at all—he snatched one shallow breath and said, "He's got my kid. Oh God, Toby. Sim Carlyle's got my kid."

"Carlyle? Your human trafficker?"

"Aye. The one I handed Lila the evidence on last night. That's the price—he wants that back and for me to retract all the statements I've made on the case. It's been over twenty-four hours. He's had her for—"

"Hush," Leitner commanded. McBride crashed to a halt, the unthinkable period for which his daughter had been in the hands of hostile strangers breaking to bits in his mouth. "This Carlyle. He's powerful, or powerfully connected anyway? And he's told you—because you're here now—to act as if nothing's happened?"

McBride nodded. Voice cracking, he repeated the phrases that had been haunting him all night. "Business as usual. Make it look good."

"Then that's what we must do, starting now. I am going to help you. Look up and out of the window in case we're being watched. Take heart."

McBride did as he was bidden. It was hard—his grief was like rocks pressing down on the back of his skull—but he couldn't believe he'd lapsed even this far, and got his chin up with fierce determination. Leitner's grasp was still firm round his: he squeezed once, tightly, then let him go. "What am I going to do?" he whispered, staring out through the snow.

"Has he asked for anything else? Money or..."

"No. Just the evidence. The best of it's a couple of digital photo cards my snitch gave me. Toby, what am I—"

"You're going to cooperate. Fully and straightaway."

McBride felt his mouth open. His lips were slightly numb, and he struggled to articulate past the dusty dryness of his throat. Leitner had resumed his watch of the embassy, his expression unreadable. "What? I thought you... I thought your lot—Mossad—had a nonnegotiation policy."

"Some units. My unit does. They apply it stringently."

"Then..."

"What do you believe, James? Absolute nonnegotiation makes hostage-taking pointless? Yes, ultimately. Ideally. But how many lives, how many abductions is it going to cost before every terrorist on the planet is convinced of that?"

McBride, lost in his fear as he was, heard the passion of this statement and wondered. "I...I don't know."

"I don't either. I used to think I did—I used to be very certain. Listen, James—this is one little girl, not the Munich Olympics. Not a principle my nation has to get across to another nation's militants. There will be other ways and times to catch this Carlyle of yours. We only have one chance to retrieve your daughter."

"I tried. I told Lila I'd been drunk throughout the investigation. I wish it had been harder for her to believe, but...it was useless anyway. She said the photos proved me right in spite of myself."

"Has she acted on them?"

“Not yet. She said they’d gone for enhancement. Most of what my snitch got was pretty dark.”

“Good. Good.” Leitner drummed his fingers on the wheel. “And without these photos, the rest of your case falls down?”

“Not really. I was pretty close before I got them. But they would clinch it, yes.”

“Then we will retrieve them.”

A brief helpless laugh tore out of McBride. He remembered his obligations and smoothed his expression clear. “They’re in a high-security police lab. How do we plan to do that?”

“With all due respect, outside of London, British police have no idea what *high security* means.”

“But they’ll be on the computers now, in the system.”

“James, I am Mossad. At least—” his voice roughened, “—at least for now. You may as well know, your Lila isn’t the only one being given her last chance. My partner, Avrom—he was taken hostage himself during our raid in the West Bank. My unit’s noncooperation policy extends even to its own men. Oh, I’d believed in it myself. I believed, right until I saw a gun pressed to Avi’s head. And then I tried to cut a deal. I offered six insurgents safe passage, right in front of my *katsa*, my...my superior officer.”

McBride shivered. The car was cooling, but it wasn’t that. He was seeing a young man—as beautiful and real as Toby Leitner—being held at gunpoint. In the midst of his fear, he saw it. “It...it didn’t work?”

“It might have. I don’t know. My *katsa* countermanded it, and they shot Avi.” It was calmly delivered, but McBride heard clearly the abyss of pain behind the words. “So. I am now no longer so sure about our hard-line policies. I’m on the thinnest of ice with Mossad. But thankfully I still have the skills they taught me, and we are going to use them to do what we have to for this bastard Carlyle, and get your little girl back. What’s her name?”

“Grace,” McBride said weakly.

“Grace...” Toby fell into thoughtful silence for a moment. “In Hebrew we would say *Chanah*. And no one else knows about this?”

“Only her mother. My wife, Libby.”

It had only been twelve months. McBride still sometimes forgot to add the *ex*. Why did it matter? It didn’t, he supposed, except Toby’s face had clouded oddly. “That is—we’re divorced. I didn’t tell her, not really. She worked it out for herself.”

“And she wouldn’t confide in anyone?”

“No, not Libs. She’s staunch to her marrow.”

“And all alone.”

McBride swallowed. *Yes. As lonely as I was until I found you.* The injustice of it struck him hard. How had he become so unremittingly, casually selfish? “Yes,” he said, ashamed. “She’s all by herself with this. I didn’t... I only thought about how it was for me.”

“Here.” Toby reached into an inside pocket and handed McBride a mobile that bore more resemblance to a slick, tiny NASA computer. “I doubt your friend Carlyle is smart enough to trace calls, but he won’t trace any on that. Call Libby on her mobile and tell her what we’re going to do. Tell her everything will be all right.”

Chapter Eight

Blackfriars car park—a multistorey concrete eyesore, a demolition project that had run out of cash with half the structure still intact and half in an avalanche of rubble and rusting girders. McBride stood alone in the vast space outside it. Here a new factory had been meant to take root, that project too shelved for lack of funds. It had been a bad year.

A bad year, and the snow that might have softened the back end of it, blanketed its sorrows, had turned to sleet, every mean speck of it a wet, wind-driven devil that found its way into the gaps in McBride's clothing. Between the buttons of his coat, into his upturned collar. The scarf wrapped round his throat was no defence. His hands, thrust deep into his pockets, had gone numb some twenty minutes before. Sim Carlyle was late for their proposed meet. McBride waited.

He did not move when two sets of headlights finally appeared on the edge of the industrial estate. He kept his head up, let the sleet batter his face and eyes and allowed himself to be seen. He was not armed. Tucked inside his coat, pressed safely tight to his side in a plastic bag, were not only the digital photo cards, but three slim files he and Toby had lifted from Lila Stone's office. Motionless, rigid as a statue in the wind, McBride almost smiled. For a while for two strange hours between two and four in the morning, he had nearly forgotten the grief and fear behind his mission. Toby, who up until then had scarcely conformed to McBride's image of a secret agent, had transformed. He'd curtly sent McBride off to trip the alarms on one of the Harle Street back exits, then dodged past the deserted security desk out front. By the time McBride had made his way back to their prearranged meeting point in a little-used side alley, he had disabled the alarms for that whole sector of the building, and he'd let McBride in through the fire doors, only the smallest glimmer of amusement showing he might have been enjoying his work.

McBride had almost enjoyed it too. He watched the double set of headlights come closer, sending silver cones through the sleet. Here in the half-world between Edinburgh's civilised centre and the industrial wastes, he could see Christmas lights strung along the distant streets. Their reflections touched the

puddles, filled them with delicate blossoms of light. Gracie loved them, pestered the life out of both parents to take her to see whatever Z-list celebrity had been bribed to do the switch-on. This year neither Libby nor McBride had found time. There'd been a row. McBride watched the tyres of the oncoming vehicles shatter the flowers to mud and ice.

They pulled up ten yards away from him. Two men got out of the first and one from the second. The passenger from the first vehicle began an immediate, swaggering walk towards him—fearless, and with good reason. McBride could see the heat the other two were packing from here. He wasn't really interested in them, or in the man striding up to plant himself, arms folded, directly in front of him. He couldn't see into the backseat of either car. Or maybe it was the front seat of the second that was all in all to him, the counterbalance between life and death. "Do you have her?" he said, staring over the man's shoulder. "Is my daughter with you?"

"Aye. A deal's a deal, copper."

McBride's attention snapped to him. He knew the voice. "*Make it look good, copper.*"

"Sim Carlyle," he rasped. "My God. The organ-grinder."

"Aye, well." Carlyle had looked different in his mug shots and in the snitch's photos. Up close, he was a skinny insignificance of a man; McBride would not have glanced twice at him in the street. "No reason the monkeys should have all the fun. I wanted to take a look at you, McBride, and for you to have a look at me. Do you understand now, that I can't have my business concerns scrutinised? That I have to be left to go my own way?"

McBride took him in. He didn't even look particularly villainous. His hair was clean, the teeth in his thin-lipped smile no better or worse than the average Scotsman's. He wore a nondescript hooded fleece. "I understand," McBride said.

"Good. Because for a while back there, you weren't taking me or my warnings seriously at all."

"No. I know. I'm sorry."

“That’s the man. Now, it’s a cunt of a night, so we’ll no’ hang about. What do you have for me?”

“What you asked for.” McBride took a careful step back. He wanted the men waiting by the cars to be able to see and understand his movements. “The photo cards and three files of evidence. They’re inside my coat to keep them dry. I’m going to open it and reach in with my right hand. I’m unarmed. Okay?”

“Knock yourself out.” Carlyle seemed only amused by his caution. He’d extracted from one pocket a Biro lid that had seen some chewing already, and stuck its stem between his teeth, smiling politely. “I maun say,” he observed around the obstruction, “it’s a sight easier, dealing with a pro like yourself. I won’t insult you by looking at the goods.”

McBride took out the plastic bag. It seemed so light and fragile, to be payment for a life. He had stood by and watched in the Harle Street photographic lab while Toby had used the sophisticated little phone to access the internet and download code after code, hack after hack, to get into the Lothian PD’s mainframe. On thin ice with Mossad or not, he clearly still had friends there: McBride had listened as he tucked the device beneath his ear and conducted conversations in rapid-fire Hebrew, tapping away at one terminal’s board and then another, until McBride had recognised the first in the sequence of dark, blurry pictures his snitch had obtained.

Had watched them disappear. “Will it insult you,” he said to Sim Carlyle, “if I ask to look at *your* goods?” Toby had instructed him to hand over the evidence sight unseen if he had to—if anyone’s safety should depend on it—but to try, if he could, to make Grace’s abductors show their hand. “*To obtain proof of life,*” Toby had said.

Carlyle shrugged. He turned to glance back at the cars. As if waiting for this signal, the man by the second one walked around its bonnet and pulled open the passenger door.

Not a sight, but a sound. McBride’s desperate hopes had only given him an image of how it would be to get back his girl—her bright little flag of red-gold hair on the fly, her skinny frame running hard to cross the space between them. He lowered his head: it was her voice slicing out into the night, closing the gap.

His eyes stung. She never called him *Daddy*, not since she'd been six years old. More likely to call him *McBride* than let down her fierce guard so far as that. But there it was: "*Daddy, Daddy! Take me home!*"

"All right!" He shoved the bag into Sim Carlyle's outstretched hands. "All right! Let her come to me."

"Ah, now. Have a care, McBride. You *are* a pro—too much of one to be here alone. You'll not take it amiss, I hope, if I ask you to stand here a moment longer while my friends and I get clear." McBride sucked a breath to protest—but the passenger door was closing again, the lost little voice cutting off as it shut. "No need to worry. See, I'm just going to lock her in..." Carlyle pulled a key from his pocket and pointed it back toward the car. Sidelights flashed; a soft grind of remote locking found its way through the wind. "And I'm going to give the key to you. Me and my—well, I suppose you'd call them *cronies*—we'll leave in the other car. Soon as our taillights disappear, she's all yours."

They were gone. McBride began to move. The stupid thing was that, after all this, he found he couldn't run—his legs wouldn't bear him any faster than this nightmare slow-motion walk. A low cry tore from him. What must his girl be thinking, that he was only *walking* to release her, to rescue her...? His numb hand went slack on the key, and he fumbled and dropped it: heard it skitter away across the concrete. "*Shit!*"

The sleet-whipped dark around him took a form. Down on his knees, scrabbling, McBride felt rather than saw Toby Leitner shoot past him, unerringly picking out the key from a puddle a few feet away. Leitner was like a piece of the night, his movements powerful and sure. "I'll get it!" he yelled to McBride across the gale. "I'll get it! Stay there!"

He must have thought McBride was hurt. He wasn't wrong, come to think of it. How had he ended up here on his knees? He'd only bent to see if he could find the damn key. Then his injured leg had gone out from him, and Toby had stepped in. Come running down from his surveillance post behind the concrete pillars of the multistorey.

And that was all right. For all its occasional haughtiness, Toby's was a face a frightened kid would like to see appearing out of the dark—those softly shining

eyes and that sweet smile.

But why did Toby want to get there first? Why was he pallid with urgency, warding McBride off with an outstretched hand? McBride's guts lurched. *Bollocks!* he told himself fiercely. *You heard her. You'd have heard a gunshot, even a silenced one, from there.* He staggered to his feet. His skin was going cold over every inch of his body, his tongue turning to stone. Toby was a good man, a kind one. He cared about Libby and Grace without ever having seen them. And yet he'd shouted, *"I'll get it."* Why the hell hadn't he said, *I'll get her?*

McBride reached the car just as Toby tore the door open. He tried to shoulder him aside. There should have been no problem, in terms of relative bulk—when McBride shouldered someone, they moved—but Toby was set like a rock. "No," he said, turning, grabbing McBride so hard by both arms that the strength of his grip bruised the bone. "James! No."

"*What?*" McBride roared into his face. "Fuck it, let me go! I heard her! She's fine. I—"

"You heard a recording." The door was open wide. Toby's eyes were terrible on his—bleak, remorseless. "They taped her. She's not there."

McBride almost laughed. Then, from the car's dark interior, came the thin, high voice, the same as before—"Daddy, Daddy! Take me home!"

The same as before. Exactly the same. McBride heaved his weight forward again, and this time Toby let him go. McBride knew very well you had to, with some of the bereaved. They wouldn't take *dead* for an answer; you had to let them into the morgue. He leaned into the car, grabbing at the far side of the passenger seat to keep from falling.

Anyway Toby was wrong. It was a CD, not a tape. *Nice touch*, something in McBride observed, the part of his good copper's mind that never shut down, that always had time to admire the Edinburgh criminal and all his works. On a tape or an MP3, anything analogue or through the radio, he might have heard the hiss. He might have known. But this was perfect—crystal clear. The *take me home* phrase played again. Then there was a tiny gap—not jerky at all, just enough for a scared child to draw a breath before going on—"Daddy, come and get me."

They've no' hurt me, but I'm frightened!" Then there was a series of sobs.

McBride straightened and eased out of the car. He might have heard more—Carlyle's man might have let the disc play on—if he hadn't fallen, like a slab of bloody granite, for the very first phrase. He was hearing more now.

Toby moved him gently aside. He reached into the car, found the right button and stopped the CD. He ejected it neatly, took a beautifully clean white handkerchief from his coat's breast pocket and wrapped the disc. "I...I saw," he said, tucking it away. "From where I was, back behind the pillars. I thought I saw the car was empty, but I couldn't be sure. I couldn't tell you."

No. He wouldn't have been able to; it hadn't been his call. It had been McBride's—on the ground, not twenty feet away. McBride had given away their bargaining chip, their one chance. He'd sold Grace out—for the second fucking time, he'd thrown away his child.

The wind changed direction and found a new chill. The sleet had thinned out to nothing. Too late for a white Christmas now—there was nothing but cold and the wolf's-tooth wind and emptiness.

Toby stepped around him. Why? What was he doing? Did he think the world would be any less vacant for McBride, that McBride would be to himself any less of a failure, a thing, a bloody abomination, if a man stood in one place rather than another and held his shoulders—even a man with tears of shared feeling in his wide dark eyes? "I'm sorry," Toby said. "Oh, James."

He was trying to shield McBride from the wind. That was why he'd moved. It took McBride a moment to work this out, and when he did, it broke him. As no words could have done—no, not even that grated-out *sorry*, not even tears. That sheltering move was instinctive. McBride did it with Grace when they were out, automatically shepherding her to his leeward side. Edinburgh was a wind-whipped town. When she'd been tiny, he'd chosen which hip to carry her on according to which of the four quarters was howling that day.

McBride burst into tears. Toby stepped forward and seized him. McBride crashed into his arms, clutching everything he could get of him, crushing the fabric of his coat. Toby's hand found the back of his skull and spread there,

stroking, pressing it down. “Ah, James! It’s all right, it’s all right!” It wasn’t, but McBride lost all hope of saying so as his mouth found dark wool on Toby’s shoulder and opened wide in a gut-wrenching sob. Scents of lanolin and rich, assuring male body rushed into his lungs. *No!* He tried to fight, but Toby’s arms had gone round him like cables, one round his waist and the other across his back. *Libby doesn’t have this comfort, Grace doesn’t have it and I, least deserving—I can’t...*

But he had no choice. Toby held him fast, sheltering him from the wind, and after a moment McBride buried his face tight against his shoulder, grasped him as hard as he was being held and gave up and wept.

* * *

The CD deck in the BMW was state-of-the-art, better than anything McBride had at his flat. And parked up in this wasteland, he wouldn’t disturb the neighbours with his daughter’s cries for help, played and replayed at maximum volume while he tried to recognise a background noise. There *was* something, eight seconds or so into the third clip—a kind of whistling, followed by a rumble. He played it again and again. It was easy to find. It fell right after “*Daddy, please help me*” and right before a sobbed “*Oh, Daddy, please take me home.*”

Toby, who had been listening too, chin propped on his hands on the wheel, reached over and snapped the player off. McBride turned on him with something between a sob and a snarl. “What are you doing?”

“Enough, James. It’s enough for now.”

“You wait until it’s your kid. Then you can tell me what’s damn well *enough!*” In answer Toby only passed him the handkerchief he’d wrapped the disc in. McBride caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview and took it, shuddering. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right. I don’t have a child. I can’t feel what you’re feeling. But if you don’t go home now and get some sleep, you’ll be useless to her. Have you got a laptop with a CD drive? Broadband?”

“I... Yes, I do.”

“Right. I’ll get this uploaded and sent to my contacts in Tel Aviv. And we should go back to your flat anyway. He’s been communicating with you via your answer phone, and—”

“Why would he leave me any more messages? I gave him what he wanted.”

“A man like Carlyle won’t stop there, James. He won’t waste what he’s got, not now he’s seen how far you’ll go to retrieve it.”

* * *

But in the flat, the answer phone was silent. Something in the blackness of its lights, its dumb, smug silence, warped McBride’s grief into rage. He took his sleet-soaked coat off and threw it onto the sofa. *Take your guest’s*, a tiny voice of long-ago home training tried to instruct him, but he ignored it. Ignored Toby, who had followed him up the stairs and was standing, just as wet and chilly as he was, looking around the living room. McBride gestured to the laptop on the table, then turned and walked away.

He stood in the kitchen. He knew why he’d come here, of course. He might have elected not to put a bullet into his brain the night before, but still he had his escapes. Not so radical, but bloody effective, and—he smiled, uncorking a bottle of Cutty—a damn sight quieter.

Toby appeared in the kitchen doorway. McBride saw him only as a reflection in the sleet-flecked window and didn’t turn round. He picked up a glass from the draining board: might as well impress his guest and not drink from the bottle. “Thought you were busy...uploading that disc to Yahweh, or whoever your Israeli contact might be.”

The ghost in the window glass shrugged. Even from here McBride could see its eyes were full of compassion, shared pain. He didn’t need either. “It’s done,” Toby said. “I cc’d the Mossad acoustics lab too, just in case. Why was it so easy for your boss to believe you were drunk throughout your Carlyle case?”

McBride stepped aside, just far enough so Toby could see, then poured himself a good, theatrical treble, bottle held high. He’d faked his confession for Lila that morning, but it was real enough now, the hunger inside him, the desire to numb his senses even in full knowledge that he needed them all razor-sharp, giving his words a terrible authenticity. “Isn’t it obvious? I’m a bloody alcoholic. That’s

why. Oh, I'm sorry. Would you like one?"

"No, thank you. I..."

"Of course not. What would a nice, prim, clean-living Jew know about—"

Toby seized his arm. It was the one McBride was using to lift his glass. Something strange happened to it—all the strength went out of McBride's grip, and the tumbler fell and shattered on the kitchen floor. "What the fuck, man?" Jerking his head up, he tried to square off to Toby, who was no longer a ghost, but a big, angry, real human being, dark eyes blazing into his. "Let me go."

"Oh, I will." Releasing his grasp, he gave McBride a contemptuous shove and stepped back. McBride rubbed at his numb hand. He noticed distantly that Toby had taken off his coat uninvited. The cuffs of the fine black sweater he wore underneath were damp: he had pushed the sleeves back, exposing tanned, sculpted forearms. "I told you, McBride. I'm not a religious Jew—I'm a thoroughly secular one, and I've drowned my sorrows in ways that would make your hair stand on end." Involuntarily McBride looked at the skin exposed between Toby's wrists and his elbows. Toby wasn't showing it to him—his hands were down by his sides, fists clenching—but McBride, after fifteen years dealing with junkies on Auld Reekie's streets, could spot track marks, even ones as ancient and near-faded as these. "I've done undercovers that turned me into as desperate a crackhead as the bastards I was after. And when my Avi died, I... didn't want to know anymore. I took what bloody comfort I could."

Fury rose in McBride. What did Toby want? *Okay, so you know how it feels to have an addiction?* He was clean now—McBride could be in no doubt over that; he could almost smell the man's cleanliness, the strength boiling off him in waves. He didn't need this shining example standing over him, this fiery sword, making him feel smaller and meaner and dirtier even than he knew himself to be... "Screw you," he choked out. "You don't know anything. Your lad died, and I'm fucking sorry, but it wasn't your fault."

"No more is the loss of your daughter yours."

"Och, the devil it isn't! Libby tried to tell me. Lila Stone tried to drag me in off the streets. Even Sim Carlyle gave me warning—had his heavy boy tell me the

trouble was going to follow me home.” He turned back to the kitchen bench. If Toby was going to make him smash his glassware, he would just have to watch him swig from the damn bottle after all...

A hand closed on his shoulder. “James. Please don’t.”

“Ah, fuck off!” McBride wrenched round on reflex. His anger peaked, and he threw one wild, blind punch, not caring where he connected or how much damage he would do.

Not that it mattered. Toby picked his fist out of the air as if it had been a bunch of roses. Effortless. McBride felt his blow’s force turned against him and spun away, staggering to crash into the kitchen table.

The impact somehow steadied him. Knocked a demon out of him, maybe—he was glad, in the instant between hitting the table and grabbing its edge for support, that he’d been so easily thwarted.

So what the hell was Toby doing on the floor? McBride got his balance. “Toby?”

“I’m all right. Stay back.”

Belatedly it struck McBride that Toby had arrived that night minus his sling. Well, he couldn’t have done much with one arm strapped up like that, could he? Couldn’t have driven, or tapped a symphony of magic and technology out of the Harle Street computer boards. Couldn’t have wrapped a fearless, lifesaving embrace around that thankless bastard James McBride when his world had tried to end in a freezing car park half an hour before.

“Oh God,” McBride whispered and stumbled over to drop to his knees in front of him. Blocking that punch must have wrenched every muscle round the bullet wound. “Sit up a bit. Let me see.”

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

But the rich voice was squeezed to a shadow of itself. Toby’s head was down, his fringe concealing his expression. Tenderly McBride brushed back the dark hair. “Did I make you bleed again? Here...” Evading Toby’s deflecting hands, he

reached to dab at the black cashmere over his heart. It didn't feel wet, but he had to be sure, and he grabbed the jumper's hem and lifted.

"All right. No, your dressings look okay, thank God. Shit, Toby—I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I shouldn't interfere with your...God-given right to get pissed..."

"Ssh. I'm not going to. Come here—let me help you up."

But neither of them moved. McBride did not let go the edge of Toby's jumper, nor did he lower it. Below the hospital bandages, the broad chest was brown and smooth as the wet, hard-packed sand at Forvie dunes. And so bloody *warm*—McBride's thumb brushed the skin by accident, and then, unable to help himself, he spread his left hand flat on the uninjured shoulder, on the pad of pectoral muscle just above the nipple.

Toby flinched. "Your hands are cold."

"Everything's cold," McBride rasped. To his astonishment, Toby placed a warm, lifting touch on his jaw. God, if he looked up—if he let Toby raise his chin—they were so close that their mouths would meet, and that would at best be a crippling embarrassment, and at worst...

A kiss. He closed his eyes. For a wild, flashing instant, he was twenty-four years and fifty miles away, lying in the birch grove that gave Loch Beithe its name. Then he thudded back into his flesh—his own dark here and now, where the only light, the only heat, was the press of Toby Leitner's mouth to his. It was impossible. It was so fucking wrong. It was all and everything McBride had ever wanted, and he seized him, wrapping both arms round his neck.

He didn't know which of them put the effort into hoisting the other off the floor. He was only aware of Toby's embrace—the heat of it closing around him once more, driving the cold from his bones. He gasped as his spine hit the kitchen wall, making china rattle in the cupboards. Toby's grip closed in the fabric of his shirt, tugging upwards, and suddenly there was that sunlight touch direct on his skin. "Oh, don't. Don't, I'm not..."

"What?"

“Not toned and nice like you. I spend too long at a desk. I—”

“What? You’re lovely.” McBride twitched in astonishment: Toby sounded genuine, genuinely surprised. “Solid. Real. Please let me touch you.”

So McBride did: clutching Toby’s shoulders, pressing rough kisses to his mouth and the side of his neck, he let the warm hands untuck his shirt tails, slide up and under to caress his chilly skin. The curve of his spine, the place just over the waistband of his trousers where he’d begun, unaware of it even himself until this moment, to be a bit shy of his body and its ageing, a bit ashamed. “*Solid. Real.*” A shudder of pleasure ran through him, and he rolled his hips against Toby’s, erection surging up hot and hard and straightaway, racking a moan of embarrassment out of him until he felt Toby’s returning thrust, and everything about it was perfect—so good, like coming home, a refuge even in McBride’s bleakest midwinter night. “Ah, stop! We can’t do this!”

“I know. I know.” Toby shoved himself back to arm’s length and stood panting. “I don’t know what I was thinking. Forgive me.”

“Forgive *you*...” McBride ran shaky, regretful fingertips down Toby’s chest. “What the hell must you think of me—doing this, when my girl is... When I don’t even know if she’s alive or—”

“No.” Toby captured his wrists, held them hard. “She’s alive. And you were just reaching for life, James. We both were. If it makes you feel any better, I... swore I’d never touch anyone again, not after Avrom.” He hesitated and gave McBride a look that went through him like a hot knife into butter, sweeter than a summer wind. “I never thought I’d want to.”

“Toby...”

“Ssh. It isn’t for now, is it? Not for now. For now I want you to go to bed and try at least to rest for a couple of hours. I’ll watch the phone.”

McBride nodded mutely. The hormonal surge dying back in his system, he was worn to cobwebs, swaying on his feet. “All right. Do you reckon... Should I call Libs?”

“Do you think she’ll have been able to get to sleep?”

“I dunno. If she’s as tired as I am, maybe.”

“Then don’t. Not with news like this. We’ll wait till morning.”

“He’ll have called by then, won’t he? Carlyle?”

Toby frowned. He rubbed the backs of McBride’s wrists with his thumbs, making the little bones crackle. The gesture was intimate, undemanding. “He values Grace. And he hasn’t got full price for her out of you yet. He’ll call.”

* * *

And yet, three hours later, stumbling out of his bedroom into a dead-grey Edinburgh dawn, McBride understood at once that the phone had stayed silent. He also knew without a second glance that a different version of Toby Leitner was pacing his living room to the ones he’d met so far. This wasn’t the cool, professional Mossad agent or the passionate lover of this morning’s small hours. This man was bitterly furious. “He didn’t ring,” McBride said, taking firm hold of the back of an armchair.

Toby swung round at the end of his lap. He strode back down the track he’d almost worn in the carpet and stopped in front of McBride. In this light, McBride could see—and even in this desolation, it touched him and brought him an odd sense of relief and satisfaction—that this powerful man, whom he’d thought to be in his mid-thirties at most, was about the same age he was. Fine lines marked his brow. The pale light revealed flecks of silver in his hair. “No, he did not,” Toby declared grimly, “and now I know why.”

McBride nodded. He had woken with the same thought running through his mind. “He’s a trafficker,” he said. “He’s got the evidence he wanted, and he knows I’ve got my copper’s salary and bugger-all else than that. He’s not after a ransom. He’s found a...” His throat dried, and he choked, letting his aching head drop forward into his hands.

“He’s found a buyer for her.” Toby’s words fell like stones into the quiet room. “I’m sorry, James. That’s why he’s gone silent on us.”

The phone rang. Somehow McBride pushed himself upright, exchanged one grim look with Toby, and went to pick up. Covered the receiver and mouthed

across the room to him, “No. Only Libby,” then folded down into the alcove and listened while his child’s poor mother let go a night’s worth of fear and grief down the line. Peripherally he noticed Toby going to the computer—his movement more of a pounce, as if he’d heard something. Then he shook his head, running a hand into his hair. “Libs. Libby, no. I know you’re scared, but I’ve told you why we can’t involve other coppers in this. I...I know she’s not back.” He pressed his brow against the glass, praying its coolness might enter his brain. “Christ, I *know* what I promised, but if you blow everything now, we’re gonna lose her, Libs! I’m begging you—”

“James.”

He looked up. Toby was gesturing to the computer. “Hang on just one second. What is it?”

“My Tel Aviv contact found a noise on that CD upload—a howl, like somebody fooling around, maybe pretending to be a ghost. But recorded, mechanised. Then people screaming and laughing. Do you know what that is?”

McBride stared at him. He’d sat in another of Sim Carlyle’s clubs in the Cowgate, night after hard-drinking night, hearing that racket with distant pity for poor tourist fools. Half ten on the dot. “The Black Cat,” he said. “Backs onto the town’s oldest graveyard. They guide groups in there on haunted-city walks. Then they leave them alone, switch the floodlights off and play a stupid bloody ghost howl.”

Toby almost smiled. “You’re sure?”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

“Right. Then he’s had all his chances, the bastard. To hell with cooperation. He knows you, but he doesn’t know me. May I speak with Libby?”

“You want to...” McBride hesitated for a second. Then, as if hypnotised, he held out the receiver.

Toby took it gently. He put one hand on McBride’s shoulder. “Ma’am? My name is Tobias Leitner. I’m a special agent working with James on the case of your daughter’s abduction. I’m sorry we failed to retrieve her last night. But we

know now where she's being held, and it's my intention to enter that place undercover and get her back."

He sounded so calm. For a moment McBride allowed the assurance in his voice to wash over him. He closed his eyes and heard Libby too falling under the spell, the edge of hysteria fading from her voice. McBride drifted away from her half-heard questions, Toby's measured, steady answers. He remembered his dreams—searing nightmares about Grace woven through with flashes of how it would have been if Toby had followed him to bed.

"James?"

He jolted upright. Toby had hung up the phone and was crouching in front of him. "Yes," he said roughly. "Sorry. Is she all right?"

"She's surviving. Are you?"

"I'm not sure. Toby, what the hell type of undercover are you going to pull in the Black Cat?"

Toby shrugged. "That's easy. If Carlyle has a buyer, I can be a better one. I'll break any deal he's made. I'll do better than that—I'll wear a wire and get enough evidence to bring the whole lot of them down."

"For that we'll need a surveillance van and—"

"Yes. A team to intercept and raid if anything goes wrong. I can take a handful of men off the Zvi op to help out, but we do have to involve your department too. Are there people there you can trust?"

"I don't know. I don't know anymore. Toby, if Carlyle's lot make you, they'll skin you alive."

"They won't. I'm a dark-eyed, dark-skinned foreigner with more dirty cash pouring out of my pockets than they've ever seen in their lives. They won't look any further. Now, I'm going to make the calls I have to, and you're about to take a shower. I meant what I said last night, James—you're bloody gorgeous—but you look like you slept in a hedge."

Chapter Nine

McBride and Leitner made their way into the Harle Street squad room almost unnoticed. No mean feat in an office with glass walls, but everyone from the duty sergeant to the most recent temp was clustered round the bank of video monitors at the far end of the room.

McBride stopped and felt Toby come to a halt just off his shoulder. He was not used to having backup. Andrew had been so much his junior, and he himself over the years had become so fiercely—so bitterly—independent, he hadn't allowed any such assistance near him.

Toby said, very quietly, "Want me to do the talking?"

McBride smiled. "While I go and hide in the gents'? Very tempting. Better not, though." He cleared his throat. "Morning, everybody."

They all swung round like meerkats. Andrew Barclay was in the back row. His arms were folded over his chest, his handsome face pale. When he saw McBride, he made a brief, truncated gesture, as if he would somehow shoo him out of the room. But it was too late for that—Lila Stone was straightening from her hunched pose over one monitor, a bleach-blonde Aphrodite rising from her foam. "Detective Inspector McBride," she spat. Her lips were actually blue round the edges with rage: McBride could hazard a guess that *James* was dead and gone forever. "I was about to issue a warrant for your arrest. What in God's name have you done?"

McBride looked with interest at the monitor screens. On each of them, his fuzzy image was frozen, in various attitudes of breaking into his own HQ. Last night had been a last-ditch raid. Toby had taken out the alarms between them and their goal, but that had been all—no time to disable the CCTV. It hadn't mattered then.

It didn't now. McBride stepped forward. "What I've done," he said, to Lila and to all of them, "is stolen as much of the evidence as I could in the case of Sim Carlyle. I took it, and I handed it over to him last night. He's got my daughter.

That was meant to be her ransom, but it didn't work."

Lila Stone gaped. It was Andrew who broke the dead silence that had fallen. "Jim," he said hoarsely. "Carlyle's got *Gracie*?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Andy. I've just been—"

But McBride got no further. Andrew strode across to him. He gripped McBride's shoulders for a second, then hauled him into a rib-cracking bear hug. "Jesus Christ! What can we do?"

"Detective Sergeant!" Lila barked. "McBride is under arrest. I need two of you—Davies, Royston—to escort him downstairs immediately and confine him while I decide what to do."

McBride pushed Andrew gently back. He looked at the floor. There was no reason, he knew, for his former teammates to do anything other than obey. He'd walked away from them, pursued a solitary path. Abandoned them... But after a long moment, Lenny Royston said, incredulity painting his Ormiston burr, "Your bairn's been *abducted*, McBride?"

"Yes. He snatched her to punish me for trying to bust his Grassmarket op."

"How long?"

How long? McBride fought the urge to close his eyes. *Forever. Since Arthur's Seat was live and blasting lava into the heavens.* "Two nights. Three days."

The silence that followed was not dead at all. McBride hadn't heard it in a long, long time, and he got his head up to listen. Lenny was looking across at his partner, Davies, and Davies in his turn leaned forward to glance first at Andrew and then the others. This was the electric hush of a good team deciding—not what to do, but how to do it. Of widely disparate men drawing together, coming to agreement.

Because, apart from Lila, everybody in this room knew Grace. Things had been different with McBride back then. His colleagues had followed the progress of Libby's pregnancy with the usual jokes and dire warnings. And when he'd brought the child in for the first time, a huge-eyed scrap in her white woollen

blanket, every one of them had gathered around, even the tough bastards, awkward and grinning. “I need...” he began, and then his voice died.

A hand pressed the small of his back. Even through his thick coat, McBride felt the strength of it, the comfort. “We need to set up a sting,” Toby went on for him, and again McBride was aware of that group consensus, the ripple of energy as attention shifted and refocused. Something else too—the clicking of a door, although no one spared the newcomer a glance. “We think Carlyle will try to traffic Grace tonight. I will go in as a buyer with a better offer, try to get her out quietly that way.”

“What, just...*buy* her?”

That was Royston. Toby nodded and received an approving grunt. An economical lot, these Scots, although not in the way of their national reputation. They just liked to do their jobs as simply and directly as they could and with as little drama. “If I fail,” Toby continued, “we can’t risk leaving the child with him any longer. We need a team to monitor the body mic I’ll be wearing and another to keep surveillance all round the building. He’s holding her somewhere in the Black Cat club’s premises in Cowgate. If he or anyone else tries to leave with her—”

“Excuse *me*.”

McBride jumped. He saw his reflex echoed in a few bodies around the room: they’d almost forgotten Lila Stone. In that room of northern brogues, where Toby’s softly accented English blended too, her knife-blade vowels carved a chilly track for themselves. She was on her feet but looked ready to drop, as if the last recognisable sands of her world were running out.

“May I ask who the devil are you?”

Toby frowned. “I’m sorry, Superintendent? I believe we were introduced to each other at—”

“No. I mean who the devil are you to walk into my offices, take over my team and start to set out some half-baked plan for an operation I haven’t even sanctioned, let alone—”

A new voice rang out. Calm. Female. No, not new at all—utterly familiar. “Oh, now, Lila. I hate to disagree with you in public, but it’s not a half-baked plan. I think it’s quite a decent one myself.”

The echo of a thousand mornings here in this very room. Turning, McBride saw Royston, McKay, Davies, all of them—hearing it too, and with the same thoughts, the same surmise dawning. My God. Yes—there was Amanda Campbell, leaning on the wall by the whiteboard as if she’d never been gone. He blinked and rubbed a hand over his eyes. Superintendent Campbell, or *ex*, except that...

She was in uniform.

“Aye,” Campbell said, returning McBride’s openmouthed stare with a half-apologetic little shrug. “Assistant Chief Constable now, I’m afraid. I’m very sorry, Lila—they more or less drafted me, after this business with Ambassador Zvi.”

Lila gulped audibly. “I don’t... Ma’am, I don’t understand.”

“I know. I’ll speak to you privately in just a minute, once I’ve sorted out this matter of—”

“No.” Lila was shaking her head. “You have no business sorting out anything in here. This is my department.”

“Where you’ve been so busy kicking backsides, you probably haven’t had time to check your inbox and voice mails. Some mornings are like that around here. You’ve been suspended, Superintendent. Now do us both a favour and don’t make me go into details in front of this mob.”

For a moment McBride was afraid Lila would fall down in a fit. “You have no authority—” she began, then broke off, visibly remembering that ACC Campbell had. “This operation Leitner’s proposing—I’ve heard nothing about it from General Sharot. It hasn’t been sanctioned by Lothian and Borders either, as far as I know.”

“That’s right. As far as you know. But since you’ve been taken off duty, pending the outcome of General Sharot’s investigation, you have to consider the

possibility that there are things your superiors may not wish to tell you at present.”

Lila’s mouth dropped open. Then she gathered herself and, with more composure than McBride would have given her credit for, surged through her surrounding officers and left the room.

Amanda watched her go. Her expression was almost regretful, as if she’d just witnessed the circus leave town. “There goes trouble,” she said thoughtfully. She turned to face her men. “If any of you enjoyed that, stop. She’s right. I am in charge now, and she has been suspended—but as for official sanction, you only have mine. If anyone here’s uncomfortable with that, he’s free to leave now.”

No one moved. McBride, breathing shallowly, vibrantly aware of Toby’s steady presence behind him, felt as if tides of time had closed over his head. He wanted to let them—to be back in that old world where his colleagues still liked him and Superintendent Campbell ruled Harle Street. Amanda looked utterly at home in her old place by the whiteboard. Her eyes were serene and determined. “Very well,” she said at length. “In that case I suggest we go out and find this bastard that’s taken my goddaughter.”

* * *

Gearing up for an op. McBride had forgotten how that felt. Not pulling on fancy-dress tartans, but Kevlar vests, and no longer in proud solitude, but as part of a unit whose acceptance had once given him equal pride. Dark had come down outside the bright Harle Street windows. The squad room was mutedly buzzing with voices and life—equipment being checked, strategies run through once, twice, a third time to be sure. Toby had gone to meet with General Sharot and get clearance for his part in the night’s activities. McBride, if he couldn’t be there at his shoulder in Sim Carlyle’s club, would do the next best thing and listen to every word and breath of him from the surveillance van. He went to join Amanda at the table where she was studying spread-out floor plans of the Black Cat’s premises. “You got hold of those fast.”

She nodded. “Guy at the Land Registry owes me a favour or two. Couriered them over on a bike.”

That was the difference, McBride thought, scanning the plans for himself. An

officer like Campbell had men and women all over the city who owed her a favour or two, and not only that but they liked her enough to act fast when she called them in. Not looking at her, he said, “Is this permanent, then? The honour of your presence?”

“I don’t know.” She traced the line of a wall with one finger. “Whether it is or it isn’t, James, you’re going to have to accustom yourself. Bosses like Lila Stone—not Lila herself, I don’t think. She’s made the kind of mistake they don’t forgive—but her breed... They are the future for this police force. Not me.”

“Christ.”

“There’s a lot of good in Lila. People of her sort—the cost-cutters, the politicians—will still be around when this scythe of a recession’s finally passed over us and gone. And so will their departments.” Amanda straightened and looked at him. “Part of Lila’s trouble was that she didn’t have a senior officer she could trust. She didn’t have the trust of her most senior DI.” McBride looked down. *She didn’t damn well deserve it* died on his lips. He’d hated her from day one, hadn’t he? Had never given her a chance. “God, James,” Amanda went on. “Was it because she’s a woman? You worked with me like a lamb for ten years.”

“Aye, but you’re—”

“What? Old-fashioned? A lesbian?” She was smiling at him a little, her narrow, clever mouth curling up at one corner. “Is that easier, for someone like you? I often did wonder.”

“Someone...someone like me?”

“Mm. Poor Libby. Poor you, if that’s the game you’ve had to play. Is it over now?”

“Amanda, I’ve...absolutely no idea what it is that you’re talking about.”

“Oh, right.” She nodded at him genially, then returned to her study of the maps. “Then you’ll no’ have noticed how grand of a shine that nice Israeli officer’s taken to you. And if you have, you’ll no’ care.”

McBride drew a breath, though with very little idea what he would do with it

when it came out. His heart was thudding hard. Images flashed around the edges of his terror for Grace: Toby, a reflection in his kitchen window, and then a reality breathing in his arms. Toby waiting for him when he'd stumbled out of bed that morning, all lit up with the beautiful fires of his rage. McBride had thought only he in all the world could see that shine...

"Amanda," he began, but got no further. The squad-room door opened wide. Campbell, McBride and all the other officers stopped what they were doing, and then after a small tense pause, a ripple of laughter went round. "Och, the pair of you," Amanda said, her expression a mix of amusement and disgust. "I'd arrest you both on sight."

McBride couldn't even find a smile. It was too unsettling, to see Toby like this. His disguise—Andrew Barclay's too, though McBride had never noticed him leave—was hardly flamboyant. Incredibly subtle, rather, and depending for more than half its effect on the way Toby held himself, the new set of his shoulders and his head. He was wearing a suit finely calculated to imitate expense and miss the mark. His hair was oiled and slicked back. He was so dark his five-o'clock shadow had come in with piratical vigour. He looked...sleazy.

And still McBride would have given his arm and a week's pay to drag him off to bed. At this moment, in the middle of all this hell. What had Amanda said? "*Someone like you.*" Someone queer, then. Homosexual. He shoved his own old word for it out of his mind, and then his father's stone-cold, heart-killing label.

Someone gay. It still wasn't right, but it would do for McBride for now. It would do until better days. "Bloody hell, Toby," he said in awe. "I'd have walked past you in the street."

"And kept right on going, if you'd any sense," Toby returned, a sudden smile restoring him. "And your young colleague—is he sufficiently vile for you too?"

McBride dragged his eyes off Toby. Andrew had on a similar uniform, except he'd transformed into the kind of flash young club lout McBride often found groaning and vomiting in the Harle Street holding cells of a Sunday morning. For the moment he was glancing around, too pleased with himself and his badness to carry it off, but when Toby gave him a tiny admonitory look, he dropped back into role. And now McBride did laugh—a snorting, almost painful

rumble. “Aye. He’s horrendous. What the devil did you do to him?”

“Very little. This lovely suit and a lesson in personal deportment.” Toby turned to Campbell. “With your permission, ma’am. I will need immediate backup inside the club, and DS Barclay volunteered. He hasn’t been seen with DI McBride during the Carlyle investigation, and—”

“And I wanted to make it up to you, Jim,” Andrew interrupted him, blushing brick-red.

What was McBride meant to say to that, in front of the whole squad? Eyebrows were on the rise, none more expressively than ACC Campbell’s.

It didn’t matter. Not the audience, anyway. What mattered was the young man’s willingness to risk his life to rescue Grace. “There’s nothing to make up for,” McBride said quietly. “Nothing at all. But thank you, Andy.”

* * *

Almost eight o’clock. The Black Cat would be open. In another hour or so enough of the right type of customers would have gathered for Sim Carlyle to conduct his business discreetly. For Toby and Andrew to enter the premises without drawing attention too, and so Campbell’s men bided their time.

Behind a partition screen, McBride helped Toby take off his shirt. Once that was done, and the garment set aside on the desk, McBride picked up the wire spool the Harle Street technician had given him. Both he and Toby kept their attention rather intently fixed on the body mic as McBride placed it carefully just beneath Toby’s right collarbone. He tore two strips of tape off their roll and pressed them to Toby’s smooth skin, securing the wire. “There. That should do it. How’s your shoulder?”

“The muscles are seizing a bit now, but it’s all right. I had the dressings changed while I was off becoming Viktor Maralek.”

McBride nodded in approval. Yossi Maralek was real enough, and his shadowy tribe of cousins enough of a legend in the trafficking underworld to have a ring of truth if Sim Carlyle asked. “Who’s Andy going to be?”

“Oh, he’s a nameless nobody tonight.” McBride handed Toby his shirt and

held it while he stiffly shrugged into it. “Much more than that to you, though, James. Do you want to tell me about it?”

“Much to my surprise, I do. I will later—after the op, when you’re safe home. But...it’s over. Okay?”

Toby watched him in silence for a moment, taking in this answer and McBride’s reasons for giving it. “Okay,” he said softly.

“Should I wire him up too?”

“No. We don’t really need it, and if things go wrong, it gives him plausible deniability. He can get away.”

But I want you to be able to get away. Where’s your deniability? McBride closed his lips tight on these words. He’d sent scores of men into danger, walked into it himself scores more. Anxious questions never helped. “Thanks,” he said. “He’s a good lad.”

Both of them glanced across the room. Andrew was standing in the window, his back turned, his head bowed thoughtfully. As they watched, he straightened a bit. “It’s snowing,” he said. “Properly this time. Had anyone else apart from me forgotten it’s Christmas Eve?”

A few of them had. Not the ones with kids—McBride saw Lenny and a couple of the others glance at their watches, surreptitiously hopeful. Not Amanda either, McBride was sure—she and Jenny always made a quiet, fervent thing of it. “I remember, Andy,” she said, laying aside the gun she was checking. “Make your good wishes to one another now, if you like—just in case it’s after midnight before we get done.”

McBride glanced out into the dark, where big white flakes were whipping past the streetlights. He knew what she meant. *Say it now, in case you don’t come back at all.* He nodded wryly at the gruff and offhand twenty-first-century blessings being tossed his way; threw back a few in kind. Then he turned to Toby. “Happy... Oh.”

Toby smiled. He hadn’t finished fastening his shirt. Even in his Maralek guise, to McBride he was such a perfect sight that he wanted to fall into his arms.

Toby held them out for him. Professional to his back teeth, he'd chosen the one spot in Lila's glass office from which neither he nor McBride could be seen, though McBride only noticed this slowly, locked in his embrace: he was lost, would have seized him and kissed him on the Scott Monument if that was where they'd happened to be. "Ah, James," Toby said to him unsteadily, "it's last night of Chanukah too, if that makes you feel better. But it's all just a festival of lights. Your city is a city of lights, and you're the brightest of them. I'll never forget what I found here."

Chapter Ten

The heart of the city was slowing. Patches of frenzied activity continued still, and would to the bitter end—shops along Princes Street holding wide their doors until ten for frantic last-minute shoppers; clubs like Carlyle’s that would pulsate into the small hours with garish life. Nevertheless McBride could feel it. As the surveillance van nosed through the crowds on the George IV Bridge and into the Cowgate’s network of closes and wynds, he knew that for every reveller out on the cobbles tonight, thousands of ordinary, tired men and women were going home. Closing themselves in with their families or their solitude. Starting the sweet, dumb, commercialised pantomime of Christmas with their kids.

“James?”

The van was slowing. McBride looked across to Campbell, sitting opposite him in its rear. In her council worker’s overalls and the high-vis vest, which would ironically make her invisible, she looked the part. She’d tucked her hair into a black woolly hat. “Grace will be all right, you know.”

McBride swallowed painfully. He knew he looked the part himself, in donkey jacket and vest. Maybe this was what he should have gone in for—patching up road surface from a council truck. Then the world—a tiny, boring world, but sacred and intact—would still be on its axis. “I thought I’d know too,” he said hoarsely. “Always did know in the past, if she’d hurt herself or anything was wrong. But now I can’t get any sense of her at all.”

“Doesn’t mean anything. Just hold on.”

Lenny Royston, sour faced and convincing at the wheel, pulled the van up just behind the plastic barricades where genuine roadworks had been going on. Amanda nodded in approval, and the two sound technicians they’d brought with them went to work, hitching up recording equipment and headsets. McBride and Campbell got out into the snow, leaving Lenny and his partner in the van’s front seats, beginning their surveillance. “This’ll do,” Campbell said, frowning critically into a hole in the tarmac. “McKay and Janice Dee have got the other exit.”

“Dee? The Glasgow lass? I thought she’d swung Christmas leave.”

“She had.” Campbell tugged down the edge of her hat and looked more like a scrawny wee navvy than ever. “She came rushing in to join us when she heard our Andy was going undercover.” She smiled, stepping out of the way of a group of laughing hen-party girls, snowflakes melting in their feather boas. “All sorts of people trying to look out for their fellas tonight, eh, James?”

“Och, Manda! I...I just met him, all right? He’s been good to me—so good I don’t know how I’ll ever pay him back—but...”

“DI McBride?” The sound tech stuck his head round the door of the van. “I’m picking up a signal on Agent Leitner’s mic.”

McBride almost bulldozed Campbell down. He stopped himself, mortified, putting out a hand to catch her. She waved off his apology, pushing him ahead of her into the van. “I know, I know. You just met.”

The voice on the wire didn’t sound like Toby’s at all. McBride, settling onto a stool in the truck, bidding his hands not to shake on the headset, listened in bewilderment. A top undercover man himself in his Edinburgh pond, McBride wasn’t sure he’d last five minutes with Mossad. This was Viktor Maralek he was hearing. His intonation bore no resemblance to Toby’s Israeli lilt: Yossi was Slovenian, and so was Toby now. McBride was sure the accent was authentic. Not that Carlyle would know or care: he’d be happy if his client fell under his broad definition of *foreign*.

And McBride could pick out Carlyle, even through the roar and clatter of the crowd. That was one voice he’d always know, and Carlyle had no thought of disguising it. There he was in the background, cackling and shouting with his mates. He sounded elated. A terrible chill seized McBride’s guts as he tried to think what might make a hard-eyed psycho like that sound so damn happy.

Then, he wasn’t entirely a psycho, was he? According to his lights, he was a businessman. He wasn’t going to kill the goose. Amanda pressed a knee to his in the confines of the van, and both listened intently while Toby closed in on the target.

It happened fast. So far all McBride had heard was background conversation, Toby chatting idly to the barman, then exchanging a word or two with other punters in the crowd. Then suddenly Carlyle's voice was loud in the mic, and Toby—Viktor, a toneless stranger, the voice of a shark if one had decided to talk—was saying, "Hey, Sim. I hear you have merchandise."

Amanda almost dropped her notebook. McBride too felt his heart lurch into his throat. But after a moment's terror, he understood what Toby was doing. Understood it was a brilliant move—perhaps the only one. To go straight in without preliminaries, with a grand assumption Carlyle would know exactly what he meant. That he had the right to be asking. Leave no time for suspicion, for wonder.

A silence had fallen around Carlyle's table. McBride could see it as clearly as if he'd been there—the ring of surprised faces, the suspension of activity. "Who the hell are you?"

"Maralek. Viktor Maralek." Perfect—just the right tone of disgust. Someone like Carlyle, someone with *merchandise*, should know him. There was a faint rustle, the sound of a powerful, confident man sitting down uninvited. "Well? I heard you had it. Did you make the deal already?"

"What's it to you if I did?"

"No. What is it to *you*, Sim? I've heard of you too. You don't hand over goods like that to the first bidder."

Another silence. Then Carlyle said, in tones of imperfectly hidden surmise, "You said your name was—what? Maralek?"

"That's right. Not gone deaf from all this shit music you play in your clubs, have you?"

A smile in Toby's voice. Not a nice one. And the bait was taken—McBride saw Carlyle's throat gape helplessly wide. "What's your budget, then, mate?"

"Half again what your first man put down."

And that was right too. *Double* would have gone too far, triggered Sim's

alarms with its extravagance. Maybe smacked of desperation. As it was, all McBride heard after that was Carlyle's flat instruction, "Come with me," and the sounds of two men making their way through a noisy room to somewhere quieter.

And sirens.

McBride frowned. He clamped the headset harder to his ears, then saw Amanda was laying hers down. Doing the same, he listened. Three or four—no, five, another one lifting its voice into the wailing chorus. He wouldn't have paid them a moment's attention except they were so suddenly close. Coming closer. "Amanda..."

"Don't worry. Someone else's party going wrong, I should think."

"Aye." A punch-up, a jumper on the bridge, some other traditional festivity. McBride put his headset back on in time to hear Toby ask coldly if the package was intact. His stomach lurched at the implication, but Sim snarled back, just as frosty, "D'ye think I'm a fool? That's what you pay for. There's no' a finger mark on it."

McBride let his brow rest for a moment on his hands. "Oh, Gracie..."

"James!"

He snapped upright. Amanda had seized his shoulder. He turned to look up at her. "What?"

"Trouble."

He tore off his headset. Through the front screen of the van he saw Royston and Davies coming to attention. Snow was billowing past the windscreen, beginning to form spirals in the wind. Lit up in red and blue... "Amanda, what the hell—"

"I don't know. Squad cars. Four or five of them, pulling up just down the road."

McBride grabbed the back of the driver's seat and leaned to look out. Christ,

yes—Lothian and Borders bearing down in all its glory, all the racket and fanfare Campbell’s team had worked so hard to avoid. The sirens were a wolf-pack howl. He met Amanda’s eyes, watching her come to the same conclusion at the very same instant. “Oh no. *Lila*.”

His discarded headset crackled. McBride snatched it up. Not a crackle—a thundery flutter, as if the cloth near the mic had been seized. A short, intense hush, the sound of the sirens coming through the wire. Then Carlyle’s panicky snarl: “What’s that noise, then, Maralek? What the fuck is *that*?”

“How should I know?” Toby sounded unfazed. In his mind McBride saw him, lifting one broad shoulder in a shrug. His eyes would be calm. His mouth would be ghosting a smile.

“Maybe you forgot to pay a bill.”

Gunshots roared down the wire. McBride jerked back helplessly, the headset clattering to the floor. He yanked it back up and listened again—frantically clamping one earpiece flat to his skull—but Toby’s mic was dead.

McBride leapt into the street. Once there, he fixed himself, a rock around which chaos instantly began to part itself and flow. The doors to the Black Cat were wide open, disgorging a stream of panicked bodies. The bouncers were trying to keep order, but the club was tiny; a gunfight in there would sound like the end of the world and put everyone into the crossfire.

Police cars were still arriving. One of them skidded on the snow and screeched to a broadside halt three feet from McBride. He scarcely bothered to look. He was waiting, listening. The squad-car doors flew open, and somehow he was sharing the kerb and the blizzard with Lila Stone and the chief constable for all of Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders. He’d had bad dreams like that. Assuming this was real, he growled, “What have you done, Lila?”

She ignored him. All her attention was fixed desperately on the brass she’d brought with her. The CC was watching her in his turn with an intense and hawklike interest. “I told you, sir,” she gasped. “This is an unauthorised raid.”

“DI McBride? You in charge here?”

On another night McBride might have been flattered the CC recognised him. For now he was just waiting, listening. “Nn-nn,” he grunted, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at the van.

“Campbell.”

“Aye, and it was going fine until you lot came blazing in... Oh, Lila. I might have known.”

McBride let Campbell and all the rest of them fade into static. The CC had brought serious heat with him: all the way up the wynd, police marksmen were taking position behind the open doors of their cars. To what end, McBride wasn't sure, unless they intended to shoot their way through the frightened crowd still spilling onto the pavements. Still too many of them for him to make his move, and he didn't yet know where to go. He was waiting, listening. Vaguely he heard the CC's ominous rumble. “You mean you disrupted an operation set up by my division's most trusted senior officer?” Then the gunfire came again.

A short, sharp exchange. The marksmen crouched, cocking their rifles. The crowd surged, screams piercing the clamour, but McBride could see a gap. And he had a destination—the first floor.

Amanda was in front of him. “James. No. Don't you dare.”

Everything I've got's in there, Manda. My kid, my partner.

Toby.

He couldn't say any of it. He put her aside—gently, almost into the arms of the CC. And then he ran.

* * *

The club was almost empty. The music boomed weirdly to a vacant floor, coloured lights and strobes whirling in dead air. A handful of terrified punters still crouched under tables, huddled against walls: he ignored them, scanning the darkness. Only one exit could lead to the upper floors. Unshipping his weapon from under the donkey jacket, he made for it, cautiously pushing wide the doors.

There was a body on the stairs. For a moment McBride felt only distant rage, a

copper's grief for the civilian dead; this poor lad in his shiny suit had probably just been on his way back from the gents'. McBride bent to check for a pulse, found none and began to step over him.

A strobing beam from the bar swept over the fallen man's peaceful face. Air left McBride's lungs. His damaged knee gave, and he grabbed at the banister to keep from falling. "Oh God, Andrew. Andy!"

Another bark of gunfire from the floor above. For an instant McBride couldn't take it in—couldn't move for the stony paralysis of grief inside him. Then he heard Grace scream.

He lurched to his feet. Christ, what a noise she made—like a cat picked up by its tail. Oh, she was Libby's girl, all right, and his; she sounded, more than anything, pissed off. Like a flare in the dark, that cry. McBride briefly touched Andrew's hair and ran again.

* * *

A narrow corridor ran from the top of the staircase to a set of double doors. The doors had porthole windows. Flattening himself to the wall, McBride took his Walther in both hands, snapping off the safety. He could see Sim Carlyle—panicked, pale, but not too much of a cornered rat to be enjoying himself. Worse things than coke and E got dealt around this club. That was a crystal-meth face, McBride reckoned, Sim not above sampling his own wares. His gaze was glittering and dead. His weapon—a dirty-looking Parabellum, adapted to take hollow points—was trained on Toby Leitner.

Toby was unarmed. He was bruised and daubed with blood, but he looked utterly serene. As if he was playing out his life's last purpose, finding his path and his peace... When Sim moved, he did too, just a little, always facing him. McBride saw why. Grace was behind him. She was at once clinging to his coattails and peering round them at Carlyle, her face creased like a wildcat's. From what McBride could lip-read, she was giving Carlyle what-for in her ma's best Glaswegian guttersnipe dialect. Toby kept pushing her back, one hand gently clamped to her bright head. He was shielding her—with his flesh, with his bone. Carlyle would have to shoot through him to get at her.

McBride kicked the doors open. Carlyle swung round. And despite everything

—despite even poor Andrew, discarded like a rag doll on the stairs—McBride gave him a moment. He said, soft and fast, “Put it down for me, Sim.”

But Sim jerked the pistol’s muzzle up. McBride knew a moment of exquisite relief. No more reason in this world now why he shouldn’t shoot this fucker dead: he nodded, as if they had come to an agreement. “Fine by me. Toby, don’t let my bairn watch this.”

Toby hoisted her off the floor. She fought him for an instant, then wailed and hid her face of her own accord. Toby wrapped an arm around her head. And McBride, once the girl’s eyes and ears were shielded, shot Sim Carlyle through the heart.

Unsteadily he holstered his gun. He stood staring at the corpse he’d just created. What did he do, when the game was over? What did normal men do?

“James!”

He turned. He’d never heard that deep, warm voice with a break in it. Toby was holding out an arm to him, the one not wrapped round his wriggling child. Grace too was reaching out for him, leaning so far she was ready to fall.

“Gracie!” He ran to catch. He grabbed the girl, and Toby grabbed him, pulling them both close and tight. “Oh God, Toby. Thank you. Thank you.” Grace’s arms clamped round his neck, a scrabbling, strangling-monkey embrace, the sweetest pain he’d ever felt. “Grace, you wee tick. Are you all right?”

“Aye! Toby promised he’d no’ let them hurt me!”

“I wouldn’t have, James. Not with a breath left in my body.”

McBride raised his head to meet Toby’s eyes. “I know,” he said wonderingly. “God. Why?”

“Because I—”

The double doors banged suddenly wide. McBride and Toby reacted as one—coming shoulder to shoulder, dropping Grace to the floor behind them, closing ranks tight. The bloodstained figure falling into the room did not look dangerous,

but McBride's nerves were wound hair-trigger tight, and his gun was in his hand and cocked before he knew what he was doing. "No!" Toby snapped, bearing his arm down. "It's Barclay!"

"Jesus Christ!" McBride dropped the gun, reflexively snapping the safety back on before he let it go. He took a couple of strides forward and stood staring down at his poor partner, who had crashed to his knees a yard away and was staring up at him, propped on one hand, the other clasped to his stomach. "Andy, you bastard—I couldn't find your pulse."

"Well, you couldn't have looked very bloody hard!" Andrew bellowed. Then his supporting arm gave, and he crumpled facedown onto the carpet. "Oh, Jim. Help me..."

Chapter Eleven

Harle Street, an hour before midnight. Plenty of late shifts McBride had worked here: it should have felt ordinary to him, dull. He sat at his desk. From here he could see and hear—glass walls, open doors—a handful of small dramas playing themselves out. Half a dozen tableaux. McBride cared about all the people in them, but he wasn't wanted onstage just for now.

He rested his chin on his hands. Over in the corner, the two sound techs were crowing and high-fiving each other, so presumably the tapes from Toby's wire were good. Royston, Davies, McKay and the others were grabbing their coats, waving at him distractedly as they scurried for the door: he nodded and lifted a hand in return. Outside Lila's old office—and axes fell hard around here; even her nameplate had been stripped from the door—Amanda Campbell was pinned down under fire, making small placating gestures at her partner, Jennifer, who'd been waiting for them on their return. Enough of Jenny's tirade drifted through for him to piece together the whole. "You swore to me it was a desk job! Then I phone to find out why you've not come home, and they tell me you're on an armed siege in the Cowgate!"

He repressed a smile. All sorts of lives finding their balance again. Andrew Barclay getting a bullet dug out of him in the Royal, expected to be fine. In an office over the hall, Toby Leitner with the duty sergeant, who was respectfully taking down his report.

And right in front of him, Libby, clutching her daughter as if she would squeeze the marrow from her bones. She'd been waiting at Harle Street too, hand in white-knuckled hand with Jennifer. Libby had Grace on her lap. Her face was buried in her hair. The child's limbs were sticking out at awkward angles with the force of her embrace. Her voice came, small and winded, out of Libby's jumper: "Ma, I cannae breathe."

"I dinnae bloody care!"

Two Glaswegian guttersnipes. McBride watched them in satisfaction. He would take to his grave with him the memory of carrying Grace up the steps of

Harle Street and into Libby's outstretched, frantic arms. He said, "She's not been hurt. At least—I've asked her, and I think she's old enough to know what I..."

"*McBride!*"

That was his daughter, blushing furiously, mortified by both her parents. "McBride?" he said. "You called me *Daddy* on those tapes."

"Aye, wi' a gun to my head."

"Gracie! He did not have..."

"No. It's a figure of speech." She gave him the shadow of her old wicked smile. "He just told me to make it sound good."

McBride shivered. That was familiar. He could hardly bear to think of Carlyle near her: he'd kill him again if he could. And debonair and bright with mischief or not, she'd been at his mercy for two nights and three days. "I think she's all right, Libs. But I don't know if she understands."

Libby raised her head. She said, her voice muffled with tears, "Och, we've had *the talk*." McBride's eyebrows went up. "Well, if we'd waited for you to do it, she'd have been at university."

He sighed. "Fair enough. Listen—Amanda's asked Dr. Taylor to come up here. She's one of the Royal's top paediatricians. She can check Gracie over here so she doesn't have to go to hospital, and then if everything's all right, you can take her home." He glanced up at movement outside. "Good. That's her now. I...I'll close these blinds for you, and I'll clear out. Then—"

"Jimmy." He turned round from trying to unfasten the tangled cord. Libby was looking at him—not oddly, but in a way McBride hadn't seen for a long time. "I'm sorry," she said. "Sorry for a lot of things."

"Jesus, Libs—you're sorry..."

"I know. A lot of blood's gone under our bridge. But...when you get done here, if you want to come back to the house, you'd be welcome. You could come back for Christmas. Just if you want."

He stared at her. His mouth had dried out. His heart was pounding in his chest like something trapped and tearing at its bars.

He loved her. He loved their child and would set down his life for either of them at a second's notice. But there was nothing in him that responded to that look of hers, that smile. Family life had been a dream for him, a ready-measured suit he had struggled all his life to grow into. What had he wanted from it? Love, he supposed—and he'd got that, as a father, in the companionship he and Libby had achieved at their very best. But as for passion—the fire he had once been young enough to think would spring up and fill his whole life, revealing its point and its purpose—the nearest he had ever come to that was in a gunfight in the Freemason's Hall and tonight in a seedy club's upper room, defending Toby Leitner.

The man who had taken a bullet for him. Who had thought he was good enough to save.

A light rap sounded at the door, and Amanda ushered in Dr. Taylor, a small, sweet-faced woman who endeared herself to Grace straightaway by ignoring all the adults in the room, crouching and shaking her hand. She would be all right for now, wouldn't she? McBride would never abdicate his duties toward her again, but...

"Are you going to see Toby?"

Grace was looking straight at him—brightly, sweetly, without judgement. Libby was watching too, her expression not so sure. "Yes," he said honestly. "If I can find him."

"Well, if you do, give him this." She reached into her sleeve and pulled off a plaited bracelet from her wrist.

"Your friendship bangle? From your boyfriend in France? Are you sure?"

"He is *no*' my boyfriend. And Toby said he liked it."

McBride took the bracelet. Grace was surrounded by women now. There was half an hour left of Christmas Eve. Backing out of the room, he saw the office where Toby had been giving his report was empty. The duty sergeant was

gathering up papers, putting files into drawers. He glanced up when McBride pushed open the door. “Looking for Agent Leitner, Jim?”

“Yes. Is he still here?”

“He got a phone call. Said he had to go. I don’t know where, but I think they’re taking the Israeli ambassador back home tonight. He might have gone straight to the airport.”

* * *

Even the most desperate of last-minute shoppers had long since gone home. Most of the revellers too—Auld Reekie was putting on her white coat, and those who knew her well took cover when that ermine descended more than four inches deep. A city of culture she might be, a city of lights, but she was the ancient hill fort still, Dùn Èideann, fifty-six degrees north, a stern and icebound place in winter’s heart.

Princes Street was almost deserted. The snow had stopped, but the sky was still laden with it, orange clouds brushing Arthur’s Seat with their swollen bellies, parting in scraps to show vistas of diamond-hard stars. Oh God, it was cold. McBride pulled his coat collar tight over his chest, blew into his hands but couldn’t begin to ward off the all-consuming chill, the hunger of the night. Anyone left out here would be eaten alive. At Turnhouse, the runways would freeze. Flights would be cancelled: Ambassador Zvi might not be able to leave.

And if he couldn’t? What was McBride going to do—pursue the Israeli team out to the airport? Wait there like the end of a bad chick flick for Toby to reappear, in a rush of orchestral music, from passport control? He snorted faintly, aware he had given the scenario a few seconds’ serious thought. No. If Toby had gone, so be it. He had crossed McBride’s life like a meteor—that unexpected, that bright. If he’d chosen to vanish just as abruptly...

A pain went through McBride’s chest, so sharp and physical he had to stop and lean against a lamppost. For a moment he wondered if all the years of desk work, drink and bad diet were about to catch up with him. It was true he’d steered clear of fried Mars bars, but there wasn’t much else that was bad for him he’d turned away.

He realised his eyes were full of tears. Transiently they sharpened his vision.

In the next parting of the clouds he saw, with stunning clarity, the hunter god Orion. McBride was too tired to smile, but the resemblance was good. Dashing, broad shouldered. Even a bright red bullet-wound star, though it was on the wrong side...

He stepped blindly into the middle of the road. It was one of the few times in the year when you could do so without being mown down instantly. He seldom looked up when making his way along Princes Street, always too busy threading his way through the crowds. He knew the ground-floor buildings well. Shops and restaurants and coffee bars. The upper storeys, though, with their balconies and pillars and other sombre fantasies of Gothic architecture—those were often given over to hotels. He was standing opposite one now. It was called the Sinclair, and its name meant something to McBride because this was where Harle Street recommended its political and diplomatic visitors to stay.

One high window was brilliant with candlelight. McBride didn't know much about Jewish tradition or symbolism, but he'd chased enough skinheads away from the Salisbury Road synagogue to recognise the shape of a menorah. Odd, though—he'd always seen those with seven lights. This one had nine.

He climbed the steps to the reception, not allowing himself to think what he was doing. Inside, a muted chaos hit him. Red-faced businessmen, sherry glasses in hand, were lumbering about, roaring and laughing, someone's idea of a traditional Christmas medley blasting from speakers in the lounge. McBride edged around the fringes of the party until he found the desk. "Hello. Is there a Tobias Leitner staying here?"

The girl on reception smiled at him too brightly. Maybe she'd been on the sherry too. She gave him Toby's room number without a bat of an eyelid. And this was where Harle Street sent its diplomats. He thought about pulling his badge. *At least ask who I am.* But she had turned away to answer her next enquiry. McBride decided that, if the streams of life were for once running his way, he would let himself be carried.

Music being piped through the stairways and corridors too. The Sinclair had gone all-out this year to produce what looked like a Japanese tourist's idea of a traditional Highland Christmas—plastic holly draped from every cornice, fibre-optic trees, light-up decals of sleighs and reindeer flashing. Normally McBride

didn't mind such excesses, or at any rate didn't notice, but now the commercialism clamoured at him emptily. He was tired, his nerves frayed to thin bare wire. He found himself, before he knew it, in the top-floor corridor, and then—still unsure if he was going to knock or turn and walk back into the night—outside Toby Leitner's door.

He raised his hand. He had barely brushed the woodwork with his knuckles when the door swung wide. Toby smiled at him, and he stepped into candlelit silence.

He stood in the middle of the room. It seemed to be rotating gently around him. Toby came up behind him, and the sense of vertigo increased.

"Let me take your coat."

McBride surrendered it. Only when Toby lifted its weight off his shoulders did he realise how heavy and cold it had become. He said, unable to turn round, "I thought you'd gone."

"I'm sorry. I had to take a phone call, and...when I looked back, you were with your family, with Libby and Grace. I thought you might stand a better chance if I wasn't around."

No. I never stood any chance there. "I mean...I thought you'd gone to the airport. With Zvi and the others."

"Oh, did they leave?" Toby was still close behind him; McBride felt the brush of his chuckle on his nape. "They'll be socked in till dawn. No, I'm not part of Zvi's team anymore. The call was from my Mossad *katsa*. I was cleared of any wrongdoing at an enquiry board yesterday. I've been reinstated."

McBride wasn't sure what to say. Toby hardly sounded overjoyed. "I'm pleased for you," he offered at length.

"Thank you. It doesn't bring Avrom back. The only difference for now is that I get to travel first class on my way home, and...I don't have to leave straightaway." His voice tightened.

"I've got one night, James."

Finally McBride turned to face him. He was made for candlelight, McBride thought indistinctly, taking in the darkness and the brilliance of him. His hair—damp from the shower, tousled—was like raw black silk. He'd pulled a shirt on in a hurry: hadn't finished fastening it, and it was clinging here and there to his skin. The elegant planes of his face were shadowed and fervent, and the insane thing was that he was looking at McBride as if *he* were the loveliest sight in the world. "I didn't think you'd come," he said. "Did you see my sign?"

"Was that...was that for me?" Toby nodded, and all McBride could think to say was, stupidly, "I thought it was seven lights. On a menorah."

"It is, but that's a *chanukiah*. One light for each of the eight nights of Chanukah, and the ninth to serve them. Maybe I'm not as faithless as I thought." He paused. Very gently he brushed McBride's snow-damped fringe back from his brow. "Tradition says they're a reminder that miracles can happen. That we should place them in a window, to...to call wanderers home."

* * *

Toby led him to the sofa. McBride had a moment of heart-stopping awkwardness: what should he do when they sat down together? Stick to his own end? Show Toby he wasn't afraid or naïve by starting things off, putting an arm around him, or...

The problem didn't arise. Leaving him there, Toby went to lean over the tray on the dressing table. McBride heard him switch the kettle on. "Oh, it's all right. I don't..."

"You're freezing. I'm sorry it's just instant. I'll call up room service if you like."

"No. Er, no thank you."

"At least the milk is real."

"Aye. I don't know why they bother with those wee plastic pots. I think it must be just to change the colour." McBride shook his head in bewilderment: was he really up here talking to Toby about coffee lightener? Toby seemed amused by the idea too. When he came back, he was smiling. McBride took the cup and knocked it back almost in one, realising only as he did so how much he needed

it. It was scalding, absurdly good for hotel-room instant. Did Toby turn everything he touched into gold? The sudden heat set off shivers in McBride: the cup rattled in its saucer, and he couldn't keep it still.

Toby took it from him and laid it on the floor. "There," he said. "There, it's all right."

He sat on the sofa with McBride, and there wasn't any awkwardness at all—not a second of it; no struggle over who would start. They reached for each other with the same tired, hungry gesture. "Oh, Toby," McBride gasped over his shoulder, shakily stroking his hair. "It's been so long since I was with another fella—properly, I mean—I'm not sure I remember what to do..."

"Whereas I spend my entire time cutting a swathe through the gay population of Israel." Toby kissed the angle between McBride's neck and shoulder, a place he hadn't even known was sensitive until the caress sent a kind of thunderbolt down through him, stiffening his cock.

"When were you last with one...improperly, if I can ask?"

"You can." McBride shuddered, putting both hands on Toby's ribs and encouraging the movement that would bear them down onto the couch. "It was very improper. Andy Barclay sucking me off in the locker room at Harle Street. Lila told him to keep tabs on me, and..." He groaned and laughed, suddenly not minding that or anything else anymore in the wonderful press of Toby's whole weight against him. "God help him, he thought that was the most direct route."

"*Ma pitom!* No wonder he was so keen to walk the fire for you. For Grace, anyhow."

"Is that what he did?"

"When Lila sent the balloon up—all those sirens—he stood off Carlyle's men, stopped them coming up the stairs. He must have known he didn't stand a chance, and I was busy with Grace. I couldn't help him."

"You saved her. You both did." Fresh joy kindled in McBride at the knowledge of his girl safe at home, probably being tucked into bed with all Libby's pent-up maternal ferocity. He grabbed Toby's shoulders, bearing him down into a kiss.

“God, I owe you everything—her life, my own. Why?”

“I was trying to tell you when DS Barclay fell through the door at the Black Cat. I don’t even know how to tell you now...”

“Don’t. Please just show me. Show me.”

Toby thrust his hips against him, a light rocking movement that made McBride cry out. All the cold was banished from him now, a fine sweat breaking. He dared to put his hands on Toby’s backside, on the strong curves of it, encouraged when Toby gasped and pushed harder.

“James, let me feel you. Is it okay...”

It was, though McBride couldn’t do more than nod frantically and push clumsy hands down to undo Toby’s belt and zip and then his own. Toby moaned, cock rising into McBride’s grasp. He shivered, seeking the contact, and McBride caressed him, letting him work up his pace and pressure until suddenly he pushed up on his arms. “Yes,” he whispered. “It’s okay. Come if you’re ready. Let go.”

But Toby’s eyes were full of tears. “I...I wish I could forget about Avi.”

“What? Somebody you loved that much? Did you live with him?”

“Yes. For six years.”

“And was that easy, over there? In Jerusalem?”

“Nn-nn. Hard like rocks.”

“Right. I bet. Listen—I had a lover once, another man. Not like Andrew—a real lover.” He brushed the tears off Toby’s cheeks with his free hand. “That was twenty-four years ago. We don’t *forget*, not if they were worth anything. Not if we are. Now...sit up a second and let me at you.”

Toby obeyed. Too startled to do anything else, McBride thought, seizing the moment. Quickly he slithered off the sofa and knelt in front of it, parting Toby’s knees. His shaft was standing ready and proud, such a sight in the candlelight

that McBride caught his breath.

“Oh, James. You don’t have to...”

“I reckon I do. Shut up. Let me see if I’m still any good at this.”

Turned out, he was. It took him all his time and self-control to accommodate the length of that big cock, and after a minute he had to grasp its base to keep from choking, but that didn’t seem to bother Toby. He’d locked one hand into the nape of McBride’s shirt and was clutching a sofa cushion with the other, his arm rigid, hips bucking wildly. McBride heard his warning shout, felt him writhe to be away—but McBride wanted all of him, right or wrong, and pinned him down hard, sucking and driving his tongue down his shaft’s pulsing length until the rush came. Toby arched, a cry ripping out of him, and then he was folding into McBride’s arms, sliding halfway off the sofa before he could catch him. “All right!” McBride’s throat was sore, the tang of semen real and immediate in his mouth. “All right, I’ve got you. It’s okay.”

They knelt together, breathless, tangled. McBride felt his unsatisfied erection pressing against Toby’s thigh, and willed it to subside. Nothing to say Toby wanted to be lover as well as beloved; could still be too snared up in his memories of Avrom to wish to go further. He waited, holding him.

Slowly Toby’s breathing calmed. He got his head up. McBride’s heart shifted at the beauty of him—flushed, tearstained, an unsteady smile lighting his face. “I’d take you down here on the carpet, James,” he said at length. “But that seems uncivilised, after all we’ve been through. Will you come to bed?”

Chapter Twelve

McBride stood staring at the bathroom door. Toby had meant it—*come to bed*, not *come for a fling-down on top of the duvet*, and no way had McBride been about to inflict himself naked between the Sinclair's linen sheets without a shower. Toby hadn't wanted to wait. Said he liked the smell of a long, hard day in Auld Reekie, when McBride had described it like that. McBride could still feel the tingle on his skin where Toby had gently tried to separate him from more of his clothes, had tried to hold him back.

He had escaped, for complex reasons. There was no doubt whatever in his mind that, when he left this bathroom, he was going to let Toby fuck him, and alongside the wild excitement of that there was a fear. He and Andrew had got nowhere near to this: the last time had been Lowrie, under whispering birches at Loch Beithe. It was that long since McBride had surrendered—even come close to letting himself go.

And he wasn't what Toby was used to, was he? The bathroom was full of mirrors. McBride, naked as day, tried not to cast yet another sidelong glance at his own solid frame. There was nothing wrong with him, he told himself sternly. He looked like what he was—a hill farmer's grandson, a copper in his middle years who seldom got enough sunshine. At least he was clean. He was fine.

But he couldn't walk out there naked. There was a robe on the back of the bathroom door—should he borrow that? And if he did, should he fasten it or leave it seductively open or...

A light tap sounded on the far side of the door. McBride was so close to it that he jumped back.

"James? Are you all right in there?"

"Um. Actually, no."

"I didn't think so."

The door swung open. McBride didn't try to stop it and didn't reach for the

robe. With Toby stark naked before him, he couldn't even think about himself anymore: he was dazzled, lost. Toby took him in—head to toe, smilingly, lingering over the hard-on that had never quite quit and, under this tender scrutiny, came back in full glory. “Perfect,” he said and reached to take McBride's hand.

The room was softly lit, the big double bed inviting. Toby had turned back the quilt. He grabbed it as they folded down onto the mattress, pulling it over them. McBride gasped at the warmth, the feel of skin on every inch of skin. So good to have this strong male body in his arms, all springy muscle, long, tough lines, calling up uninhibited movements from his own, a power he'd never have unleashed on Libs. Toby grunted in pleasure as McBride seized him. They tussled for a few moments, strength to strength, neither of them minding the bruises. Then Toby went under, with a grin that told McBride he'd be happy to stay there if that was his partner's pleasure. “No,” McBride whispered. “Please, not this time.”

“What, then?”

McBride looked into the bright gaze fixed on his. He was not used to articulating his desires. He lay, his shaft wedged tight between Toby's thighs. He could give it up and come right there in one great thrust, expend the fiery ache in his balls, the hunger that felt like snakes coiling up and down his spine. Toby wanted an answer. Wanted him to say. “Go inside me,” he groaned. “For God's sake. I'm going to die if you don't.”

Toby's expression softened. He drew McBride down and kissed him, pushing his tongue against his teeth until McBride got the idea and opened up for him, pushing shyly back in return. Then he rolled out from under. “Lie on your side,” he whispered. “With your back to me. This is best, if it's been a while for you.”

“A while...” He shifted, obedient to Toby's guiding hands. “Toby, it's been bloody decades. I dunno if I can.”

Toby reached over him. His warm belly pressed to McBride's back, making him shiver in pleasure. “You can,” he assured him, opening the bedside drawer. “The way you saw to me earlier, I can take this slow for you now. Easy and slow.”

McBride saw the lubricant, the packet of condoms, and turned his face into the pillow. He shut his eyes. Once more he had the sense of life's river running in his direction: if he could just stop fighting, he would be carried where he wanted to go. He waited, barely breathing, while Toby sheathed himself: raised his head a bit and let him slip an arm beneath it, cushioning him, holding. Strong, lube-slicked fingers caressed up the crease of his backside and then, as if aware that further preliminaries might be McBride's undoing in one way or another, pushed straight in.

McBride cried out. He struggled onto his front, sending the bedside lamp flying. Too hot, too big—he'd made a huge mistake here, and he couldn't get out a word to Toby to tell him. He'd left it too long. Too late to change his life like this. Another yell tore from him. He clamped a grip into the pillow, onto the side of the bed. Toby must know by now—must be crushed half to death in the expulsive spasms racking him. "Oh Christ! I can't!"

"Can. You're just tight, *yakiri*." McBride heard him—the strange, caressing endearment—in disbelief. He sounded a bit breathless but not fazed. Didn't he know McBride was dying here, impaled? Failing, useless, losing everything? Hot kisses landed on the back of his neck. "Lift your hips up. Let me jerk you off."

It'll take more than that, McBride thought dazedly, obeying him. Still, even hearing it had sent a hot flash of relief through him—made his straining arsehole flicker and gape round its intruder—and he shifted weight onto his knees, inching his hips off the mattress. Toby's hand found its target and took competent hold. God yes. McBride thrust desperately against him, chasing bright rags of pleasure. His movement—the tiny relaxation it brought about inside—let Toby push a bit deeper. He shifted to cover him, the weight and the pressure delicious to McBride, who subsided under it, moaning.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"Oh God. No. Never."

Because there it was—the place deep under his tailbone that Lowrie had found, after a struggle almost volcanic as this one. McBride knew what it was now, as he hadn't then, although why the squeeze on a tiny gland should send

such fireworks up and out into his frozen midnight sky remained a mystery. Toby moved, and the sparks and colours rocketed again. McBride said, “Oh,” on a deep note of surprise and yearning. “Oh, that’s it. Do it. Fuck me.”

“Yes. You’ve opened up for me. Ah, James!”

The last coherent speech from either for a long, fierce time. Toby, good as his word, ploughed him steady and hard, driving McBride on and on, past his tightness, his fear, his conviction that the world was too bad, and he himself too unworthy in it, to be given this gift. Past the point where the feel of being fucked became not just bearable, but good, and then essential, and then there was nothing else. McBride was out in sunshine by Loch Beithe. He was at his life’s beginnings, the harm that had come to him since swept away. He stiffened and rose in Toby’s arms, shouting his name. Toby embraced him, thrusting wildly, and they came on the same instant, locked together, bearing each other up through the blazing zenith. McBride spent himself into the hot grip still clenched round his cock, pulse after ecstatic pulse, as if he’d never come before and now could never stop. He broke into sobs and felt Toby seize him and cushion his fall—thrusting still, milking him and riding him as far as he would go. Melting inside him, thank God, deep spurts and a wet heat that ended the pressure, beached him at last on the mattress, facedown, boneless, done.

He struggled away. The movement yanked Toby’s spent cock out of him, but the pain didn’t matter. He had to see him, had to look into his face. Toby fought up onto his elbows as if he shared the urgency. McBride was sobbing still: he couldn’t get hold of the reins. They lay staring at each other.

“James, *yakiri*... Are you all right?”

“Yes, but...everything’s different. It feels like everything’s changed.”

Toby reached for him. They scrambled into each other’s arms. “Yes,” Toby said, clumsily kissing him. “Everything’s changed.”

* * *

A transformed city: transformed lives. McBride sat with Toby in the window seat of their snow-lit room, high above the streets of Edinburgh. The snow had stopped, but it was thick and deep and, in this sunny dawn, unmarred. The bells

of St. John's were peeling, tumbling music out over the wynds. A fantastic tracery of frost, dragons and galaxies had painted the glass: McBride pulled the duvet back over Toby's fine brown skin. "Don't get cold."

Toby smiled. "How could I be? You're like an open fire, love." Nevertheless he resettled the duvet over McBride's shoulders in return. "I think that I should wish you merry Christmas."

"Well...same to you. Is Chanukah over?"

"Yes. But I'll get you next time around."

Next time. They looked at each other, sobering. In this altered world, many things were the same. "I'll look forward to it," McBride said unsteadily. "I...do have something for you, actually. Or my kid has, anyway." He'd woken at first light and gone to fetch Grace's bracelet from the pocket of his coat. Returning, the sight of Toby sleeping had melted the knees out from under him, and he had sat in the window, chilly, unable to move. Toby had woken five minutes later and come to him drowsily, dragging the duvet. They'd watched the dawn in each other's arms.

Toby took the little strand of plaited fabric. "This is from her?"

"Yes. She told me to give it to you."

"She's a good kid." The band was too small to fit over Toby's wrist. Taking off his watch, he fastened it round the strap, tying it tight. "She was never afraid of Carlyle, you know. She just...despised him, like a little queen." He put the watch back on. "Tell her I'll always wear this."

Tell her yourself. No—show her; let her see. McBride bit the words back. They would have been a cry—and he knew, he knew, that their one night was over. "She is a good kid," he said hoarsely. "She deserves better than she's had from me."

Toby looked up. McBride could see in his dark eyes that his understanding—his grief, his acceptance—was total. He took McBride's hand. "You know, I didn't go to Avrom's funeral. I couldn't. I cut myself off from all his family too. They loved me, and I...abandoned them. I haven't been near them since."

McBride nodded, swallowing hard. “Things we both need to do. Oh, I wish they weren’t in different bloody countries, love.”

“Well, that’s...what I wanted to talk to you about.”

McBride frowned. They were talking about their parting, weren’t they? About goodbye, and all the good reasons why it had to be so. He understood too, just as well as Toby...

“I’m glad that Mossad cleared my name. I thought it was everything to me, to get back to that world, that life. But...I followed Avrom there really. We both did national service in the Golan Heights. We both got picked out for training. I’d never have done it without him. And now I *am* without him...”

“Oh God, Toby—”

“Ssh. Let me say this. General Sharot has connections here in the UK. He wants to start up a unit to provide intelligence and protect political visitors and refugees coming here. It may not be in the north—London, more likely—but London is closer than Jerusalem, and...”

McBride remembered to breathe. His head was spinning, sparkling light from the morning outside flowing into his lungs. “Would you...would you want that? Would you try?”

“Yes. Yes, if you wanted me to. Oh, James, don’t look at me like that—it might take months. I might not stand a chance.”

Epilogue

Being this sober was bitterly hard.

McBride pushed back from the desk he'd been flying for the last two months. At least his office was his own again—wood panels covering some of that glass—and if he wanted to sit and stare out into the sleet, that was his own business.

The bleak back end of February. Half five in the evening and darkness beginning to fall. Each day the tides of dusk encroached a little less on the afternoon's shore, but the change was so grudging, barely noticeable. Pretty much, McBride reflected grimly, like the changes being wrought on him by his daily AA meetings. Every day at two o'clock sharp. He hadn't missed a single one. Amanda Campbell quietly made gaps in his work schedule, and the Harle Street team—his friends, his colleagues—stayed, for a bunch of piss-taking Scots, astonishingly far out of his face on the matter. He was clean.

It had been the best, the worst and hardest thing he had ever done in his life. He was grateful his desk, his new office-bound life, was within the specialist human-trafficking unit Amanda had been commissioned to set up. Her daily companionship, the sense of doing something useful, had helped keep McBride on the rails. He could almost spare a pitying thought for Lila Stone, now dealing with traffic of another kind, out in the Wester Hailes council estates. Amanda's unit would one day liaise with General Sharot's new security agency.

McBride didn't let himself think about that. Despite the cold, he got up and unfastened the window sash; pushed the stiff, old frame up the few inches it would go. Damp air rushed into the room, spattering the sill with raw sleet. McBride breathed it deeply, looking down into the car park. There was an email in his inbox he simply couldn't bring himself to open. Normally he leapt on Toby's messages like the lifelines they were, his heart thudding like a bloody teenager's. The last few had been hurried, short, loving scraps sent from his BlackBerry. That meant he was on an op, most likely; McBride didn't know where. But this one was longer. Today, 27 February, was when Toby would hear back from General Sharot about the job.

McBride looked at his watch. Time he knocked off. The day's work was done. He was best keeping busy, and there was plenty to do. Now that Gracie was once more occupying her room in his flat every weekend, and people were actually visiting him, McBride had realised what a state the place was in and was trying to rectify matters. He was, for the first time in years, buying groceries. For his kid, of course, though Grace was as likely to beg for a trip to the chippy as subject herself to her father's home-cooked. And McBride knew, far off in the back of his mind, he wanted to keep his house decent—his house, his life—in case Toby came home.

Tyres crunched on the car park's ice. Idly McBride glanced in the direction of the sound. It was coming from the entry road—unusual at this time of night, when everyone else was heading for the exits. Golden headlights appeared, turning the sleet to drifting petals on the wind, a memory or a promise of summer. McBride watched the car turn into one of the bays and come to a halt. He smiled. It was just the kind of vehicle Toby would shamelessly hire for himself on a visit, big and powerful, no expense spared.

The driver's door opened. McBride's heart lurched, and he grabbed at the windowsill, his joints trying to dissolve. He stared for a moment. Then he turned and ran out of the room, leaving the window wide.

The car park was treacherous. McBride lost traction as soon as he was off the gritted steps. He skidded but caught himself—with some grace, he thought, and was glad, because Toby was there in the sleet-storm, striding towards him. The ice soaked through McBride's shirt instantly. He couldn't feel it. He ran to close the gap. "What are you doing here? Why didn't you tell me?"

Toby's hands closed on his shoulders. "I did. Why didn't you reply?"

That unopened email. McBride looked up into the dark, anxious gaze devouring him. "Because I knew it was about the job. I...I was too bloody scared."

"Sharot called me over here at the crack of dawn this morning. I got the next flight. I thought it was just for a consultation, but—"

"For God's sake, Leitner. But what?"

“But he wants me to start straightaway. Those tapes we got on Sim Carlyle were the tip of the iceberg. They opened up a huge network of trafficking, here and on the west coast. I’ll mostly be working in Glasgow, but—”

“But Glasgow’s just down the road,” McBride interrupted, voice rough with joy and relief. “Oh God. You’re here to stay?”

“Yes. How I’ll survive this filthy climate is beyond me.”

“I’ll keep you warm.”

Toby pulled him into his arms. “You can start right now,” he whispered, and McBride sought his mouth in blind passion.

The sleet turned to hail. Its sting drew McBride back to surface, and he pulled out of the kiss, not for his own sake, but for his poor exotic lover’s, shivering in his arms. “Come on,” he said. “I’m done for the day. We can go.”

“Don’t you need to get your coat?”

McBride gave it thought. The coat, not so much, but the keys and wallet inside it might be necessary. “You’re right,” he said. “I’ll not be a second.”

He looked up at the office windows. They were brightly lit against the oncoming dark. And unmistakably outlined in their frames, in varying shapes and attitudes of excitement—Amanda, Andrew Barclay, Lenny Royston. Davies, clearly nudging McKay in the ribs. “Oh God,” McBride said. “Look at that. Like a row of Gracie’s bloody stuffed toys.”

Toby snorted with laughter. “Want me to come in with you?”

“No way I can face them by myself. Yes, come on. And then—” he reached back and felt Toby seize his hand, invisibly to their audience in the secret space between them, “—and then I’ll take you home.”

About the Author

Harper Fox is an M/M author trying to make it as a full-time writer, with just that bit more urgency after being made redundant from her day job. Interesting times! In a way it's great, because she gets to spend most of every day doing what she loves best—creating worlds and stories for the huge cast of lovely gay men queuing up inside her head. She lives in rural Northumberland in northern England and does most of her writing at an old kitchen table in her back garden, often with blanket and hot water bottle.

She lives with her SO, Jane, who has somehow put up with her for a quarter of a century now, and three enigmatic cats. Chief among them is Lucy, who knows the secret of the universe but isn't letting on. When not writing, she either despairs or makes bread: specialities are focaccia and her amazing seven-strand challah. If she has any other skills, she's yet to discover them.



I Heard Him Exclaim

By Z.A. Maxfield

Who Likes a Skinny Santa?

Steve Adams's heart hasn't been in the Christmas spirit ever since doctors put a stent in it and ordered him to clean up his act. No longer filling out his Santa suit or allowed to make merry, he's forgoing the holidays this year and heading to Vegas to indulge in the few vices left to him: gambling and anonymous sex.

His road trip takes a detour when he encounters Chandler Tracey, who's just inherited guardianship of his five-year-old niece. Overwhelmed, Chandler's on his way to deliver Poppy to his parents. But fate has other plans and, after car trouble, Chandler and Poppy accept a ride home with Steve. Though the heat between the two men is obvious, they put it on simmer while they band together to make Poppy's Christmas as perfect as possible.

Steve soon comes to believe that while Chandler *is* the right person to look after Poppy, someone needs to look after Chandler. Fortunately, Steve knows just the man for the job.

Dedication

Many thanks to Lex Valentine and the local Word Warriors—Carol, Jaime, Karennia, Pam and Alyce. You make work fun every day!

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Chapter One

Rudolph, the red-nosed '69 Super Bee Six Pack ate up the tarmac after Barstow. If Steve hadn't been driving like a bat out of hell, he might have enjoyed it more. He missed lazing around when the weather cooled down in the winter, when the sporadic yet drenching California rain made it harder to get jobs. When the wind blew from the north and the light slanted in through his kitchen window at its lowest angle, it was time to drag out the furry suit and play Santa.

Something in the crisp air gave him the holiday urge—a combination of energy, enthusiasm and lack of self-control peculiar to the men of his family. His father and brothers already had the light wars going. Even his sister, who could usually be counted on to keep a level head all the way through Valentine's Day, had baked so much that delicious smells emanated from her house and surrounded it like scented magic.

It was a lousy time to be feeling sorry for himself but he was, damn it.

He missed *smoking*.

It wasn't as if he ever smoked in his little red honey car, but he missed having the pack in his pocket, missed the sure and certain knowledge that it was there, waiting for him to hit the rest stop before Zzyzx and Baker. He still held his Zippo in his right hand and drove with his left while he flipped the lighter's lid open and closed, rhythmically, to the music on the car's scratchy original AM radio. The Mad Greek would be another big hurdle. Usually he chowed down on a gyro or two, fat with greasy mystery meat and dripping with that creamy white sauce he couldn't pronounce.

Not happening anymore, 'cause he was newly trim, down to a lean 190 pounds on his six-foot-four-inch frame. He was now defined by good habits and clean living and muscles he hadn't known were there before they put the stent—and the fear of God—into his heart the previous January.

So this year, Monrovia's best-loved Santa was heading out of town.

Vegas, baby.

'Cause if anything in the world could soothe a man who'd lost his holiday cheer, it was the garish excesses of the one place on Earth that could afford to blow a billion bucks on a seasonal display that sucked the joy right out of the season itself.

Merry. Fucking. Christmas.

Cha-ching.

Vegas wasn't the worst place for a dysfunctional man to go for the holidays. He could watch a couple of the shows and wallow in the absurdity of being an out-of-character Santa at Christmastime. And if he was in Vegas he wouldn't have to think about all the people he was letting down this year.

Especially, he wouldn't have to think about them.

Hell, he might be able to find some company for an evening or two. A like-minded holiday escapee maybe. A man who didn't mind a slightly scrawny bear. Or possibly he'd even score himself a fuzzy little bear cub with a glint in his eye for the weekend. Someone who hadn't had his twinkle surgically removed by a cardiologist.

That could rev up Rudolph's specially rebuilt six-pack engine.

Steve needed to hit the head. The drive from Monrovia to Vegas, short as it was, always seemed far longer after a few cups of coffee. Or what passed for coffee when he was at his sister Kelly's place. She'd poured him several cups of limp decaf and baked him a tray of something she called "health yummys" while trying to persuade him to stay in town. He planned to leave the coffee in the next rest stop he saw, and the baked goods... Well. If he had a flat tire or parked on a hill, they'd be great for blocking the wheels.

Once he was out of Rudolph and stretching his legs under the beginnings of a pretty desert sunset, he felt better. The wind bit his cheeks a little. It was barely cold enough to even work up a goose bump, but it was still colder than it had been when he'd started out. He stared up at the sky, still indigo and fathomless, filled with the first spatters of stars and the barest sliver of a crescent moon. Somewhere he could hear Christmas music playing and it felt like a splash of

cold water.

Everything he was—everything he'd ever wanted to be—would fly across that sky in a million imaginations on the night of December 24. Only two days away. And he was only half the man he'd been the previous year, when he'd been round and jolly and full of life. Even in the cartoon shows Mrs. Claus knew best. *Who likes a skinny Santa?*

It seemed a terrible irony that in order to save his life, he'd had to give up the very thing that gave it meaning.

He'd talked it over with a counselor, who tried to tell him that this was the natural response to a health crisis and a major change in lifestyle—that he could and would find another healthy outlet if he simply looked for one. The doctor said that eventually Steve's image of himself would shrink to his new slimmed-down size and that his mirror image would cease to be strange and alien. That he would begin to visualize the possibilities inherent in his brave new world.

As if his physical size was the problem.

No. He hadn't even begun to explain the problem to the shrink before he realized he couldn't. *Doctor, I'm not feeling the Claus anymore.*

Ergh. Reality. *Way to harsh my December mellow.*

Yeah. Maybe he'd gotten in a little too deep. He'd undergone an enforced lifestyle change and didn't know how to deal. And of course, like always, his first instinct had been to run.

Never mind.

It would all be waiting for him when he got back.

* * *

As usual, Poppy had Chandler pinned with her enigmatic liquid-blue gaze. Par for the course, he thought as he pulled his keys from the ignition. He was bone tired and stiff from driving. They'd started south of Poway but the holiday traffic made a normally bad drive perfectly impossible, plus there'd been a terrible

accident. Poppy hadn't spoken a word since they'd passed it. Well. That was probably normal, right? Given Poppy's history, he was lucky she hadn't started screaming.

"You okay?" he asked.

She nodded.

"You need the bathroom?"

She nodded again.

He got out of the car and walked around to the passenger side and opened the back door. He leaned in and braced his knee on the seat so he could unlatch the restraint system of the child safety seat and then he held his hands out. She wrapped her thin arms around his neck and let him pull her from the car and once again he was taken aback by how slight she was for her age. Had he been that small at five? He didn't think so. His other nieces and nephews were sturdy, almost chunky little leaguers and girls who played tiny tot soccer. Compared to them, Poppy, the youngest of his siblings' offspring and the only one who was an only child, was like a snowflake.

Poppy felt like nothing in his arms, like a ghost child. The only thing about her that seemed to take up any space at all were her rich blue eyes, which seemed huge in a face made all the more dramatic by a sharp, sophisticated haircut that he always thought looked a little too grown-up for her. The dark silky strands conformed to her head like a cap, cut straight across her brows and blunt along her jawline. With those striking blue eyes it gave her the look of an eerie French doll.

"Remember what we talked about?" he asked, unable to accompany her into the women's room and too embarrassed to take her into the men's without a plan in place.

"Yes."

"I'll go in first and make sure no one is in there," he reiterated, because as plans went, it was a lousy one. "Then I'll keep watch while you go."

"All right." Her small mouth pursed as they approached the cinderblock

building.

“Jeez. This isn’t going to be easy.” It was late enough that there were few people there, but that only made it seem deserted and ominous.

How did people do this with kids? How could a guy traveling with a daughter ever take her to the bathroom without looking like an overprotective maniac, a total perv, or both?

“You stay right here.” He left a hand on her shoulder while he poked his head around and looked into the public bathroom. “I admit to being a little paranoid about this... Hello?”

No sound came from the bathroom. He could feel Poppy squirming a little bit under his fingers. Maybe he was gripping her harder than necessary, but *gods*. He was responsible and he didn’t want to mess this up.

“Is anyone in the men’s room?”

His words echoed in the seemingly empty space. He caught Poppy’s hand and took her in, settling her into the stall after peeking to make sure it was marginally clean and there was paper.

“Close the door there, honey, and I’ll be going right here. Knock before you come out, okay?” Chandler prayed harder than he’d ever prayed that he could pee faster than she could. He heard her fiddling with paper, and he glanced back at the stall while he shot his stream only to see the backs of her shoes. Apparently she was facing the toilet.

Okay, that’s odd.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m making a paper seat, Uncle Chandler,” she told him. “Mama showed me for when they don’t have those things that come from the wall.”

Chandler shook off and zipped back up, then washed his hands as fast as humanly possible. “I’m going to go stand by the door and keep people out, so hurry up, please.”

“Kay.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and no one will need the men’s room for a couple more minutes.” He stationed himself at the door, arms folded, with the most pleasant look on his face that he could manage. He tried to make it a face that said, *Hi, I’m just a guy with a kid, have mercy on me because I don’t know what the hell I’m doing*. He waited for a few minutes, then called back inside. “You okay?”

“Mmm-hmm, Uncle Chandler, I gotta go number two.”

He managed sentry duty for a few more minutes without asking Poppy if she was all right—more than once or twice anyway. Her voice pretty much said these things take time and he should have more patience than he did. He was going to ask again when a vintage red Dodge rumbled up and parked. It was a perfectly beautiful little muscle car that looked to be from the sixties, all shiny red paint and chrome, sporting white racing strips down the nose and around the back end like war paint. It had one of those hoods with bumps like nostrils and a wreath tied between its headlights with a big red bow. Christmasy. A man stepped out, and Chandler watched him turn and lock the door with a key.

You hardly ever saw that anymore, he thought. Most cars had remote locks, and if they were higher end they had those keyless entry systems, like a Mercedes, which locked automatically. He heard a flush and turned to say, “Wash your hands,” to Poppy, who liked to think a passing acquaintance with a drip or two of water should be all that was required to satisfy the letter of the law, as if his rules about sanitation were just *guidelines*, really. “With *soap*.”

Poppy made some comment, and he turned to find the man who’d driven up in the red car standing right in front of him. He prepared his best explanation for why he’d seemed to be talking out loud to no one in case he was asked. The man just stood there, waiting patiently. It got awkward after a minute, and Chandler gave up.

He smiled. “Have you noticed how often you see people who appear to be talking to themselves these days? I’ve stopped wondering if they’re crazy. I don’t even look for the Bluetooth earpiece anymore.”

The man smiled back, a very wide, white smile. Some people looked like their pets, but this man resembled his car. He was smooth and solid and the way he wore his hair was a little old-fashioned. He was strong and upright, he seemed *special*, in the good way, and he put Chandler at ease almost immediately.

“I know what you mean. People standing around having half a conversation used to be a bad thing.”

“My niece is in there.” Chandler jerked a thumb toward the door behind him and shrugged apologetically. “I didn’t want her to go in the women’s by herself. I’m just waiting for her to be done.”

“I see. I can wait.”

“Awkward traveling with a little girl.”

“Is it?”

“Yes,” Chandler sighed. “Especially—”

“Uh-oh.” Poppy’s little girl voice echoed off the tiles.

“Poppy? You okay?”

“I got my pants wet on the floor.”

“How bad?” Chandler called. “Do you need to change them?”

“Is the floor *pee water*?” Poppy’s voice rose in alarm. “I don’t want pee water on my pants, Uncle Chandler.”

Two more men walked up, maybe college age. One was hopping a little from foot to foot. They stood behind the white-haired man with the nice smile but didn’t look as patient.

“Okay, just...dress and come out,” Chandler begged. “If you need to change, you can change in the car, okay? I have your duffel bag in the trunk.”

“But...”

“I’m sure it’s not pee water, honey.” Chandler was starting to sweat.
“Sometimes they uh...hose the place down and it takes a while for it to dry.”

Poppy called out. “Do I still have to wash my hands?”

Chandler looked toward the sky. “Not this time, Poptart. We have hand sanitizer in the car and you can use that.”

“Okay.” It wasn’t a minute before she was coming out the door trailing a bit of toilet paper on her shoe. She tried to use one foot to get it off the other and succeeded after a couple of tries. “It was all wet.”

“I know, Poppy.” He put a protective arm around her as he walked her back past the line of men waiting to use the bathroom, which was now up to four.
“Let’s go, shall we?”

“I need new pants, please.”

So polite.

Sometimes he wished she’d say something absurd or just a little bit rude. Something that wasn’t necessary. When he was a kid he barraged his parents with endless chatter. He’d had to identify every single animal, orange tree and oil well. He’d been compelled to read every sign out loud, pointed out every McDonald’s, and he’d begged to be set free at every play place along the highway. His parents would have been praying for him to shut up or administering motion sickness pills—although he’d never gotten carsick—because it made him sleep.

He didn’t blame her for being quiet, but he saw any talking she did as a good sign. The doctors said that after the accident she hadn’t spoken at all for nearly two days, and they were worried she might not for a while. They told him that when he’d arrived she seemed to get her bearings. Not even a month had passed since her parents died. She didn’t have to chatter like a magpie, but he’d hoped that she would loosen up more with him.

She turned her head and looked back the way they came. “Did you see that man?”

“What man?” He followed her gaze. No one lingered outside after they left so he didn’t know which man she was talking about.

“The white-haired man? That was Santa Claus.”

“Santa—have you seen him somewhere before?”

“No.” She tugged his hand and pointed to the car with the wreath. “But look at that car. It must be Santa Claus.”

“I don’t think so. Don’t you think Santa drives a sleigh?” He stared at her in amazement. She had just talked more than she had all day. He unlocked the car and helped her into her seat without fastening her in so she could change when he found her something to wear.

“If I was Santa, I’d drive that.”

But just how paranoid was he? He locked her in when he went around to the trunk to get her pants out, as if someone would take her, or drive off with the car while Poppy was inside it. How had his brother lived with the weight of his responsibility, this crushing sense that he had to protect this perfect little person, day in and day out?

“How does anyone do this?” he muttered.

When he returned, Poppy was watching the white-haired man as he came back from the bathroom. He didn’t seem to be in any hurry to get to his car. He gazed up at the sky, flicking the top of a Zippo lighter with his thumb, open, then closed, open, then closed again.

“Here are your pants, sweetie. When we get to Grandma’s, we’ll wash up the ones that got wet.”

She put her blanket over her legs and he looked away while she changed. After she’d accomplished that, he fastened her safety harness and walked around to slump into the driver’s seat. He was more than ready to key the ignition and be on his way, but when he tried to start up the motor, nothing happened. It didn’t even turn over. He fussed with the key a couple more times and pumped the gas to get it to turn over, and still nothing happened except that he smelled gas

through the rolled-down window.

“Shit.” He slumped.

Poppy put her hands over her ears.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. The engine won’t start.” He cursed again more softly, then got out and knelt on the pavement to look under the dash where the latch to release the hood was hidden. “I’m going to go have a look.”

He didn’t tell her that he had no idea what to look for. She’d find out soon enough. In fact, he expected that it wouldn’t take her long to realize that men came in two different flavors, and one of those flavors could fix cars. The other, the group to which he belonged, were utterly useless without a cup of coffee in one hand and a computer mouse in the other. He looked under the hood of the car and felt like the apes at the beginning of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He peeked around again to shoot Poppy a smile. A voice from behind him made him turn.

“Something I can help you with?”

The man Poppy had called Santa stood right behind him. Except a less Santa-like person could not exist. This man was tall, buff and fine. He was probably less than ten years older than Chandler, if that.

“Hell yes. I have no clue what to look for. I raised the hood as a cry for help.”

The big man’s nose wrinkled as he sniffed the air. “Did you flood it?”

“Probably, but only as a last resort. It didn’t start before I pumped on the gas. Didn’t even turn over.”

“Gas won’t help you if she won’t turn over. You can’t start a fire without a spark.”

“Ha, like the song.” Chandler peeked at Poppy again and said the first thing that came to him, straight from The Boss himself. “Just dancing in the dark here, care to join me?”

The man pulled his head back and looked Chandler over thoughtfully. Wow.

Sky-blue eyes held an erotic challenge that was unmistakable. He followed up that look with a slow grin. A guy smaller than him and with less presence would probably get himself killed giving some guy a look like that. “Maybe some time when you’re not so preoccupied.”

That got Chandler’s full attention, and he rose, except he misjudged where he was and hit his head on the hood. Ow. He slapped his hand over it to stop the sting. “What did you say?”

“Are you nervous about something?”

“No. Why should I be nervous?” Chandler wanted to disintegrate under that curious stare.

“Okay. Yeah. I’m taking care of my niece. I keep thinking I have to keep an eye on her the whole time. It’s very distracting. I mean...I don’t want to be distracted from watching her...”

“Is she likely to try to escape?”

“No.” Chandler laughed. “It’s not that. I’ve only...I didn’t even think about public bathrooms and leaving her in the car if I need to look under the hood. I never considered what would happen if we got stuck.”

The man’s lips twitched. “Kids are pretty popular these days, though. People seem to take them lots of places.”

“Yeah. I know,” Chandler acknowledged with a sigh. “I just never had one before and I’m not used to thinking like a parent. What will I do if I can’t get the car started? We can’t just sit here. It’s not safe, is it? I just need to get to my mom’s. Once we’re there we’ll figure this out.”

Those blue eyes held compassion and amusement. “Calm down, boy.”

Chandler reacted instantly to the quiet authority in his voice. Something about it made him sigh, like when a handsome firefighter says, “Help is on the way, sit tight.”

“I’m Steve, by the way.” Steve held out a meaty hand. “Steve Adams. I know a

fair bit about cars and I can take a look. Why don't you go sit with your little buddy while I get a flashlight and a couple of other things, okay?"

"Yes, Thanks." Chandler took his hand and shook it, wilting with relief. "My name is Chandler Tracey and that's Poppy. Porphyre, actually. Her mother was French and liked purple and—"

"Was?" Steve's brows drew together.

"Poppy's parents were killed in a car accident just after Thanksgiving. Poppy was the only survivor." Chandler couldn't stop himself from looking through the windshield at Poppy. Saying that still hurt like hearing the news for the first time.

"Oh, man. I'm so sorry." Steve gripped the frame of the car so hard his knuckles grew pale in the security lights. He glanced around the hood at Poppy's impassive little face. "That must..."

"We're all mostly numb with shock, actually." Chandler tried on a hopeful-feeling smile but knew it fell flat from the look on Steve's face.

"I can imagine. I'm..." He hesitated for a moment, then turned to look the car. "I'll just get that flashlight."

"Sure." Chandler nodded. "By the way, Poppy thinks you're Santa Claus."

Steve turned. "*What?*"

"Yeah. I think it must be your car. Poppy told me that you're Santa Claus."

Chapter Two

Steve concentrated on the task at hand, not on the handsome younger man. Not much, anyway. Chandler wandered toward him from the picnic area carrying a drink from the vending machine and the very diminutive Poppy on his hip. He was speaking softly to her as they walked. She'd put her head down on his shoulder. Every so often, he gestured to the sky and she tilted back to see what he pointed out.

"See, that's Orion there, that three stars in a row. On one side of him—on the right there—is Taurus. I always remember he has those three stars in a triangle there, a butt and two feet. The one above it looks like it's the end of his tail. It's easier to picture if you've seen someone draw the lines in between."

Steve returned his attention to the car. The battery still powered the lights and they didn't seem dim. He'd checked the terminals and there was no corrosion. He got into the driver's seat and took a brief glance around. When he was young, he'd once had a problem starting his mom's automatic. He'd panicked, then realized he'd left it in gear. But Chandler's Honda was definitely in park.

After that, the logical problem was the starter. He'd try a trick or two he knew with that, and if that didn't work... Well. By the time Chandler found somebody to come out here and tow him someplace where they could figure it out, Steve would be in Vegas, long gone.

Not his problem really. He unfolded his large frame from the driver's seat and looked back over the engine. Chandler was still talking to the kid.

"That's only in the winter sky, Poptart. Those three stars are Orion's belt, and they aren't there in the summer."

"Where do they go?"

"Well." Chandler shrugged. "The earth follows an orbital pattern around the sun, so they're there, but you just can't see them."

"How come?"

Steve interrupted. "Think of the earth like big spaceship. The sky is our window. We're making a big loop around the sun, so we see those particular stars when we come back around this way every year."

Poppy looked up and then stuck her head down again, nosing into Chandler's neck to hide.

"I think you're going to need a new starter eventually, but I can probably get it going."

"That's cool. How?"

"When you turn the engine and you just hear *click*, but you know you have gas and the battery is working, try smacking this gently with something." He pointed to the starter and asked,

"Got a hammer?"

Chandler frowned. "Oh, jeez. *No*. No hammers. Um. I think we'll be fine. I borrowed this car and I don't think we should hit it with hammers or anything."

"I'm not going to break anything. There's a reason it works, and I'll explain it if you want. Do you plan to drive straight through? Will you be stopping before you get where you're going?"

"I don't think so. Who can say, though?"

"A tap or two might get it started, and if you've got enough gas and don't stop for anything, once you get where you're going you can take it to a shop. Otherwise you should head back to Barstow or someplace like that. It's a holiday weekend. You don't want to be stuck in the desert all night with your little girl, do you?"

"No."

"Get in. Make sure the car is in park and the emergency brake is on. I like my legs."

Chandler's gaze dropped and an eyebrow rose. "Your—"

“I like walking on them, anyway.”

“No, I see. They’re very fine legs, Steve.” Chandler’s lips pressed together.

“Go and turn the key.”

“All right.” He let Poppy down. “Let’s get you into your seat.”

Chandler spent what seemed like a long time settling the girl. Steve thought it was kind of sweet. He’d only seen folks act like that with babies, but maybe since she’d just come into his life, Poppy *was* his baby.

Chandler shrugged when he pulled out of the backseat. “I’ll never get used to that car seat. What a nuisance. She doesn’t weigh nearly enough to be free of it, though. She’s very small.”

“She seems pretty delicate, yeah.” Steve pulled the biggest screwdriver he had from his little tool caddy. He didn’t carry much with him because he had a pretty well stocked shop at home.

“She’s lost weight since the accident.”

Steve nodded.

“We’re going to spend Christmas with my parents but since I drive a motorcycle, I borrowed this piece of junk from my neighbor Garvin, who’s in Hawaii right now, probably laughing his ass off. We’ll still have plenty of time to get there. They’ll...they know what to do with her.”

“And you don’t? Looks like you’re doing fine. She’s a lucky girl.”

“Well, I don’t know. I’m not really that good at things like...children.”

Steve smiled. “No one is. It’s kids who train you, not the other way around. Didn’t you know that?”

“Do you have kids?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Steve motioned for him to get in and turn the key. “Over the

years. It's seems like I've had a snotload of them. Lots of nieces and nephews, lots of friends with kids. I do the Big Brother program and for a while I wanted to try scouting but those bastards..." He frowned, remembering the ban on gay scout leaders. "The Girl Scouts like me, though. I give a car maintenance workshop each year, and I used my house to teach them how to prep surfaces and do minor drywall repair, then mask and paint."

Chandler gazed at him in awe. "Wow."

"I don't have any of my own, though."

"No?"

Steve grinned. "Usually when I get with someone there are no ovaries involved."

Chandler covered up a cough with his hand. "I guess I was figuring that out."

"What about you?"

"I don't have kids. Except Poppy now."

"That's not exactly what I meant."

"I know." Chandler smiled slyly.

"Anyway, you'll be great." Steve jerked his chin toward the car. "She's already got you twisted around her finger. You're well on your way."

"Yeah."

Since Chandler didn't seem to have much more to say, Steve moved on. "Get ready to start the car, Chandler. Wait till I give the signal, though."

Chandler got in and lowered the window.

"Okay?"

"Ready."

“Go.”

Chandler turned the key and Steve banged sharply on the starter with the hard plastic handle of his screwdriver.

They had to do it three times, but finally the engine started up.

“There you go.” Steve lowered the hood and let it fall, hearing it latch with a satisfying *ka-thunk*. “Are you heading east on the I-15?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, if you have to stop the car and it doesn’t start again, try thwacking the starter or even moving the car a little manually, let it roll back two feet and try again. Sometimes that works.”

“Really?”

“Sometimes. Even if it does start, take it to a mechanic as soon as you can. Vegas would be a good bet.”

“Do you think anything will be open this weekend?”

“Yeah, sure. Besides the fact that Nevada is a den of iniquity and Christmas probably only causes a minor slowdown in traffic at the slots, people’s cars break down every day, all year round. It shouldn’t take long to replace that starter if they can get the part, and they shouldn’t have trouble. It’s not like it’s an unusual make or model. You’ll be fine.”

“Thanks so much, Steve.”

“You’re entirely welcome. Goodbye, Chandler.” He leaned down and found Poppy staring at him. “Bye, Poppy.”

“Bye, Santa. You’ll come Christmas Eve?”

He nodded. “Count on it, honey. But you’ll be asleep, right?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Cause you know Santa can't come down the chimney unless you're asleep?”

She waved at him. “Kay. I will be. Bye!”

“Drive safely!” Steve watched them drive off. For a minute he worried. What if they had to stop? What if Poppy got carsick or something and they had to stop but the car wouldn't start back up?

Steve shrugged off his worry and hoped for the best. Chandler didn't look like an idiot. He'd try smacking the starter himself now that he knew where it was. Plus, he was heading out on the I-15. If they had car trouble Steve would be on the same road, so he could conceivably help, eventually. He made for his car to head out but got stopped when a supercab pickup full of frat boys pulled in beside it. They wanted to know every detail about the Super Bee and he obliged them, opening the hood and giving an impromptu lesson on muscle cars of the late sixties.

The Super Bee was considered a budget car at the time it was made. It was all his dad could afford since he'd just had a new baby, but he'd kept it pristine, documented all the work over the years, then given it to Steve when he turned thirty.

Best. Birthday. Ever.

When the boys moved on to the bathroom for the reason they'd stopped in the first place, Steve fired up the Bee and edged out onto the highway. He figured he was about twenty minutes behind the little Honda carrying Chandler and Poppy. He wasn't about to go too much over the speed limit to catch up, though, not when he was driving a bright red shiny thing and the highway patrol were like magpies with bubble lights. Half the time they stopped him just to get a closer look. He didn't blame them. While it wasn't as sexy as a Charger or as sleek as a Barracuda, he loved his car with a nearly unholy passion. It stood to reason others might want to see her for themselves.

Steve figured he'd mosey along, doing the speed limit, and if he happened to be keeping an eye on the side of the road for a Honda whose driver—a sweet twenty-something with the world's most adorable kid—might be in need of a little more service, well. Really. He was a car guy; helping others was almost his

duty.

* * *

Garvin's car, which was unfamiliar and felt awkward to drive anyway, since Chandler was used to a motorcycle's agility, began to rumble noisily and tilt. It seemed to lurch all over the road and it took everything he had to steer it slowly to the shoulder, where he let it idle.

His heart did a terrible Irish clog dance in his chest as he smacked the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. "*Shit.*"

A quick glance in the mirror showed Poppy, white with fear, had her hands on her ears again.

"Sorry, sweetheart it's only a flat tire. We're okay, and I'm working on the cursing thing. Really, I am." He pulled the keys from the ignition. "I'm going to go take a look at what we've got back there." He turned on his flashers, then checked for traffic before he exited the car.

The tire was not merely flat, it was gone. There was simply a rim on the car wearing what looked like a frayed rubber miniskirt. A quick scan of the trunk reminded him he had no clue what he needed to be looking for, so he got out his cell phone and called for roadside assistance.

When he got back into the car he turned to face that backseat. Poppy looked to him for some sort of reassurance, he assumed, and he had none. "They're sending a tow truck."

"Okay." She nodded.

"I should have rented a car instead of borrowing this one from Garvin."

She nodded at him again.

"I can't exactly take you to Grandma's on the motorcycle."

"It's all right."

They sat in silence for a while.

“Maybe Santa will come and fix our car again?”

“I doubt it, honey. This time there’s a flat and, from what I could tell, Garvin doesn’t carry a spare. I can’t believe I didn’t check that.” He took out his phone and made a note to get a book on basic car maintenance and repair.

“Maybe Santa will bring one.”

“Maybe. But this time of year Santa’s probably pretty busy.”

“Probably.” She gazed out the window and yawned. “I expected him to be fatter. They always make him look fat on television.”

“How come you’re so sure he’s Santa?”

“My dad told me you can always tell the real Santa because he’s got real Santa eyes. All the Santas in the mall are only there for pictures and stuff. The real one doesn’t come until it’s Christmas.”

“I see.”

“And that man had Santa’s eyes, just like in the book. They were exactly the right color.”

“That was a good blue.” Chandler remembered Steve’s eyes too. “That kind of blue is pretty rare, all right.”

“And he had a nose like a cherry.”

“That’s likely because it was cold out. Your nose is getting a little pink too.”

She scrubbed at her snub nose with a small fist. “Uncle Chandler? Why do they call it a toe truck?”

“Because it has that thing on the back that can pull cars.”

“That’s more like an elbow, though, than a toe. Toes are small and wiggly.”

* * *

Steve's heart skipped a little when he saw the tow truck. He'd been kicking himself for not giving Chandler his card, at least. Maybe someday if Chandler could get away alone...

He pulled in behind the tow truck and got out of his car.

As he walked to where Chandler held Poppy on the side of the road, the tow driver acknowledged him and held out his hand. "Sweet ride, man. Kevin."

"Steve." He shook hands and nodded his head. "Thanks."

"Ever think of selling her?" the man asked. "I know some folks—"

"I've made arrangements to be buried in her." The car coveters could be pretty persistent. To Chandler, who was grinning at him with a sweet stain of pink on his cheeks, he said. "What have we here?"

Poppy waved. "Hi, Santa."

"I'm ashamed to say that the tire blew and we didn't have a spare."

"Dude," Steve began, but Chandler cut him off with a time-out gesture.

"No way, don't look at me like that. It's not my car. Even I know better than to head out with no spare."

Steve looked to Kevin and back to Chandler.

"*Normally*. I didn't think to check whether my friend Garvin kept one." Chandler bit his lip.

"Ah." *Oh my*. Someone had pretty white teeth. "Now what?"

"Now we go wherever—" Chandler's gaze traveled to the tow driver's name patch, "—Bob takes us."

Poppy shook her head. "I don't want to go in the tow car. I want to go with Santa."

"Uh...it's Kevin. I borrowed the shirt from Bob." Kevin tried his charm on the

girl. “I have plenty of room and it’s kind of fun to drive my truck. You’re up real high.”

“No.” Poppy pressed her lips together.

“We have to go in the tow truck, Poppy. You want to see inside it, don’t you?”

Steve couldn’t help but notice that Chandler’s charming attempt at coercion was striking out with his niece as well.

“No.” She shook her small head.

“Where are you going, Kevin?” Steve asked. “I can take Chandler and Poppy with me and meet you there. Poppy likes my car, don’t you, sweetie?”

Poppy nodded brightly but Chandler demurred. “I can’t possibly expect you to go so far out of your way...”

“It’s no trouble. I like to be of service.” Steve stopped that train of thought right away.

“Although now that I said it that way, that sounds kind of creepy. But I do like to help people out. It’s nice to be needed or something.”

Poppy gazed at him with hero worship but Chandler’s eyes were on Steve’s mouth while the side of his own edged up in a secret little smile... There was no mistaking that look. “So you’re a good Samaritan?”

Steve felt his cheeks heat. “Um. Yeah. Well, I guess you could say that.”

“Is there a way to secure Poppy’s car seat in the back of your car?”

“Actually, yeah, I installed a lap belt in the middle when my sister had kids. It’s not as good as one of those new tie-down things car manufacturers install, but it meets the car-seat manufacturer’s requirements.”

“It’ll do. Show me.”

Steve helped Chandler transfer the seat to his car and showed him how to put

it in and thread the seatbelt through to tighten it down. They buckled Poppy into her safety harness.

Steve asked, “Poppy, did you know that race car drivers have five-point harnesses too?”

“Do you drive your car in races when you’re not delivering toys?”

“No way. This car is a classic. If anything happened to it, that would be a crime against car lovers everywhere.”

“So you just drive it at Christmas?”

Steve thought for a minute about how much he wanted to perpetuate her fantasy that he was the real Santa Claus. In the end he decided on the truth. “Actually, I mostly drive it for fun. I have a work truck too, that I use for day-to-day stuff.”

“No reindeer?”

“I don’t have reindeer, no.”

Poppy looked so disappointed he felt bad about telling her that.

Chandler saved the day. “I always thought that reindeer thing had to be a fish story. Who believes in flying deer? For one thing you’d see deer poop all over the road on Christmas day, am I right?”

“Yeah, right.” Poppy snorted. “Flying deer.”

“Are you going to be all right back here?” Steve asked. Poppy nodded. Steve tugged the seat a little to make sure it didn’t budge. “Fine, Uncle Chandler can stay with you here if he likes, or he can come up front with me.”

“I’ll stay here.” Chandler put his arm around the little girl. “Poppy doesn’t like cars much. At least if I’m not driving we can be next to each other, huh?”

“Good idea.” Steve didn’t mind. If he’d been in a major car wreck, he’d be terrified in that backseat all by himself. He wasn’t scared at all and he was pretty

sure he wanted Uncle Chandler holding his hand too.

Timing. You had to love it. He might have met Chandler when he was footloose and fancy free but no...

“I only have the original radio in this car but if you get bored I have an iPhone that plays tunes and has a couple of movies on it. I probably have *Rudolph*.”

“Thanks, we’re cool.”

They waited while Kevin hooked up the Honda. When he finally had it ready and took off, they followed it.

Steve peeked in the rearview mirror. Chandler was gentle and soft-spoken with his niece, and he had a special smile that seemed to be just for her. Steve liked that smile—a lot—because of the way it made Chandler’s nose wrinkle kissably in the middle. Chandler’s eyes, though, looked a little tired, and not just lack-of-sleep tired.

Steve wondered if, in the aftermath of their family tragedy, Chandler had been so busy caring for Poppy that he hadn’t taken care of himself. Presumably he’d lost a brother. Steve didn’t even know what he’d do if he lost one of his.

When Chandler visited his family he’d probably get some time to rest and reflect. Judging from the way he obsessed about taking care of Poppy, it would be good to hand that responsibility off to some grandparents for a bit as well.

“Why don’t you guys see if you can rest? I’ll get you there in one piece.”

Yeah. That sounded a little creepy too. Steve couldn’t help but think that whole stranded-motorist/good-Samaritan thing formed the backbone of some of the scariest movies he’d ever seen.

“I’m not a weirdo or anything,” he reassured Chandler, who had already closed his eyes.

“Yeah.” Chandler’s lips did that secret smile thing again. “Because no weirdo ever said those words...”

Chapter Three

There was no doubt about it. Axis Tires in Baker wasn't someplace Chandler wanted to spend time. It consisted of open bays and had no office to speak of, but was extremely efficient in a no-frills way. Nice guys. When they got there, he decided to have the flat tire replaced plus all the others besides, because Garvin's tires had less tread than a pair of latex surgical gloves. Pahrump was at the end of State Routes 127 and 178, long and lonely stretches of nowhere, the very last place he wanted to have a breakdown. It only remained for him to wait.

"It will just be a bit and then we'll have you on your way," Kevin told him when they'd finished writing up the work order and Chandler had handed over his credit card. He glanced around. Not exactly an enticing place to wait.

"If you want we can sit in my car until they're done." Steve offered. "It won't be long, and Poppy seems comfortable."

"Yeah, thank you." Chandler glanced over at the little girl. The dome light from the Dodge illuminated her where she sat drowsily eyeing him. "The sooner I get this fixed the sooner I can let you go back to what you were doing before you had to play knights and maidens."

Steve shrugged. "I was only going to Vegas to blow off steam. No harm done."

"Really? At Christmastime?"

"It's a long story. I wasn't feeling the whole holiday thing."

"But now you've been cast in the role of Santa Claus by an expert."

"She's not so far off, actually, I—"

"Mr. Tracey? Here's your receipt and your paperwork, sir."

Chandler took the papers from Kevin and turned back.

"So. What's after car maintenance? Are you headed to Vegas?"

“Pahrump.”

“Ah.” Steve stood there, moving from foot to foot.

“Yeah.” Chandler shrugged. He wondered why things couldn’t just be easy. Steve’s blue eyes called to him like nothing ever, and he wasn’t sure why. It was mutual too—they’d traded furious signals from the moment they’d met outside the rest-stop bathroom. Wasn’t *that* rich. His friends would find it hilarious if he came back singing the praises of a man he’d met at a rest-stop bathroom. He glanced back to where Poppy sat in her car seat and sighed.

If ever there was a time when he needed something—when he was desperate to lean on someone bigger than him who seemed competent and unflappable—this was it. Regret could probably be seen oozing from every pore of his skin.

Brows lowered over Steve’s perceptive blue eyes. “Look, you seem like a nice guy. Would you be offended if I said you look tired? Can I help you? Are you hungry?”

Because Steve mentioned it, Chandler’s gut clenched. He hadn’t eaten since noon and it was going on nine. He’d packed an embarrassment of snacks for Poppy, and she’d been eating them, but so far he’d only grabbed a handful of crackers or a piece of string cheese each time he gave her something. He’d planned on throwing himself on his mother’s mercy and, failing that, eating from his parents’ huge refrigerator full of leftovers. He wanted a beer in the worst way, but there was no way he’d have one if he was driving.

“I’m starved.”

“I could take you and Poppy out to eat while you’re waiting for your car. Kill some time?”

Chandler glanced away. “I figured my mom would feed us when we got there but it might be some time yet. If it’s not too much to ask, could you do that?”

“Sure.” Steve relaxed visibly. “I’d be really glad to.”

* * *

Steve got Chandler and Poppy settled into the backseat of his car and left the garage behind in favor of looking for someplace to eat. Of course, in Baker, California, there was only one place that a man with any self-respect would take a friend to eat—not because it was great food, although it was better than anything else Baker had to offer, and not because of the prices, because they were high. One only went to this particular Baker eatery for two reasons—one, it was quite possibly the tackiest place ever, with its loud Greek music, its blue-and-white stripes and its inexplicable, multiple replica statues of David—who was not Greek—by Michelangelo who, as far as Steve knew, was only remotely related to anything Greek by rumor and innuendo. The second reason was because it was *there*.

They pulled into the parking lot of the Mad Greek and he parked the car.

“What the heck?” Chandler glanced around when they got out. “I’ve seen signs for this place but I didn’t think anyone actually ate here.”

“I do.” Steve frowned. “I used to.”

Chandler opened the back door and unbuckled Poppy from her seat. She let herself be pulled from the car and held her arms up imperiously for a ride. “Up?”

“Sure.” Chandler picked her up and walked with her until the three of them entered the restaurant. “Busy for this time of day, isn’t it?”

“It’s like this on heavy travel days. I used to be something of a frequent flyer between here and Vegas, and it gets crazy in the summer.”

Chandler looked around at all the lawn art statues of gods and goddesses. “It’s pretty crazy in general.”

“*Hopa*.” Steve got a dimple for that. “What do you like? They have every Greek delicacy you can imagine, including carne asada burritos and bacon cheeseburgers.”

“Whatcha think, Poptart? Want a burger?”

“I see Poppy as the kind of girl who’d have her eye on a fresh strawberry shake.”

They got in line while Chandler studied the menu. It provided the perfect opportunity for Steve to study Chandler. Steve guessed he was about twenty-seven. He was fit as hell, the arms that held the girl were nicely muscled, forearms corded like he pumped iron regularly. Chandler only came up to his nose, though, so he had to look up at Steve when they talked. That wasn't a problem, because his brown eyes had lashes like a ballerina's tutu. They lowered when they caught Steve staring, and a little rosy blush bloomed on his cheeks.

While he inventoried Chandler, Poppy studied him. "How come you're a skinny Santa?"

"I stopped coming to places like this," Steve told her. "How come you think I'm Santa? Because of my car?"

"You have Santa eyes." It sounded like an accusation, like she expected him to hand them over so she could give them back to their rightful owner.

Steve nodded. "I've been told that."

"Do you want a little plain burger with French fries?" Chandler asked Poppy, who shrugged.

Steve noticed an older couple watching them from a booth in the corner. They put their heads together and whispered something. The woman's eyes narrowed. Chandler apparently saw where Steve was looking and sighed.

"Yeah, that? I get that a lot lately. I can't figure out whether it's the gay thing or whether they just think I'm a pervert."

"It's probably not about you at all," Steve said as he turned back to find something on the menu that he could eat. Everything seemed to be...

"You ought to be ashamed of yourselves." The man who'd been staring at them brushed past Steve, bumping his arm with his shoulder, hard. "Bringing a kid into your sick lifestyle."

Steve was stunned. "Excuse me?"

The woman held her man's arm when he would have turned to answer. "Not

now, honey. This is California. Queers run the place.”

“Fuckin’ don’t make it right.”

“Let’s go. You promised.”

The man spat on the ground near Steve’s work boots. “Fine.”

They left without looking back.

“Holy sh—cow. I hope they don’t know which car is mine.” Steve walked to the glass doors where they’d entered to look out at the parking lot. He couldn’t see his car from there and was about to head out when Chandler put a hand on his arm.

“They were here when we came in, they couldn’t possibly know.”

Steve was unconvinced. “It’s got that kid seat in the back.”

“But that could belong to anyone in here. Even one of the employees. It’s a car. It’s not worth getting your ass kicked, is it?”

Steve’s heart sank like a stone. He turned to face Chandler and wished he didn’t look like a two-headed monster, but with Poppy in his arms and their faces level, two pairs of eyes blinked back at him.

Steve took a deep breath. “Okay. I’m going to say this once. That car is a classic. It is exactly as old as I am and I’ve spent my life working with my dad to keep it up. He gave it to me on my thirtieth birthday and sometimes...” He swallowed hard and willed himself not to let his emotions get the better of him. “Sometimes he doesn’t remember that so good. So it’s more than a car, yeah?”

Chandler whispered a hoarse apology and then turned and got back into line. Steve stood indecisively by the door for a minute, then left for the parking lot.

His Honeybee was right where he left her, safe and sound. No one was milling around the passenger vehicle lot. He looked to where the truckers were parked and heard Chandler’s voice right behind him.

“I didn’t understand.”

Steve relaxed. “No. It’s... There’s no reason you should. It’s probably stupid to be so attached to something like a car.”

“I don’t get cars.” Chandler’s voice was low and soothing. “I understand something about loss, though.”

Steve glanced at Poppy. “I know. Let’s go get your princess her shake, shall we?”

Poppy rolled her eyes. “I’m not a princess.”

* * *

Chandler liked Steve—a lot. He was kind of a throwback guy. Older. He seemed made of muscle cars, Hawaiian shirts and work boots. He’d probably gotten his tan from working outside, because he rocked a whole lot of freckles and had little crinkly white lines on the side of his eyes. Chandler didn’t know how he knew, but he was certain that Steve laughed a lot at work.

They’d both ordered iced tea. Chandler got himself a gyro, and a kid’s burger and fries for Poppy. She sat between them, working on those fries one at a time, dabbing each bite into ketchup. Every so often Steve reached over matter-of-factly and replenished her ketchup supply. When she dropped a chunk of berry onto her shirt from her shake he dunked a paper napkin into his water and handed it to Chandler as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“If you get that now, it won’t stain.”

“You sure you don’t have kids?”

Steve blushed. Seriously. *Blushed*. “Not unless... I can’t even think of a way that would be possible, actually.”

Chandler didn’t believe him. “Never...?” He glanced down at Poppy to make sure she was engaged with her food. “With a woman? Never?”

Steve shook his head. It was a tight little movement, as if the subject embarrassed him.

“In your whole life?”

Steve did that small headshake again, then followed it up with a shrug. “Never been much interested that way.”

“I see.”

“What about you?”

Chandler rolled his eyes. “High school.”

“And now?”

“No girls allowed.” At Poppy’s frown he amended that. “Except Poppy.”

Steve’s smile was there and gone, but that hint of pink that stained his cheeks stayed put.

“Nice to hear.” Steve forked the meat off his chicken kebob—no easy thing with plastic utensils. It was fairly healthy looking, surrounded by grilled vegetables and Greek salad. He pushed his plate forward. “Want to try a bite?”

“Oh yes.” Chandler didn’t take his eyes off Steve’s while he stabbed half a cherry tomato with his fork and popped it into his mouth. That sweet smile crept back onto Steve’s face again, but he fought it down. Once more it left a blush in its wake.

This has to be the sweetest damned man I’ve ever met.

And suddenly food was the furthest thing from Chandler’s mind. Without even thinking about it, he ran the tip of his index finger along Steve’s forearm where it rested behind Poppy’s head on the back of the blue vinyl booth. Steve had ample crisp arm hair, and his skin fairly rippled when Steve touched it, as if it were trying to get him to do it again. Steve’s blue eyes tracked that finger, then came up to study his face. Chandler did a little blushing of his own.

He was about to say something stupid—probably—when his cell phone rang. Steve laughed at his ringtone ’cause, yeah, it was the *Wonder Woman* theme—his mom’s idea... No time to explain. He grabbed his phone and stood up,

making that dumb hand gesture that meant *I've got to take this* and walked to a place where it was quiet but he could still see Poppy.

“Hello?”

Chapter Four

Steve tapped the edge of the ketchup bottle and it burped out another blob of sauce for Poppy. He was about to suggest that in the future she order ketchup soup with a couple of french-fry croutons, seeing as she was eating it at a rate of about four to one, when Chandler underwent what could only be called a drastic change in body language. He stood by the far wall in the covered quasi-patio dining area, watching Poppy from a distance, when something his caller said seemed to make him slump, as if all the blood drained from his face and the vitality left him. If Steve could read people, something he knew damned well he was very good at, Chandler had just received Very Bad News.

Steve glanced back at Poppy, who was watching her uncle as well. She seemed frozen in place, her small hand holding a fry halfway to her mouth. When Chandler turned his face to the wall, Steve pushed his food aside. Nothing alarmed him like seeing Chandler take his eyes off Poppy, even for the brief few moments it took him to get his grip. This, more than anything else, caused Steve to drop a couple of bills on the table and pull Poppy from the booth. Thank goodness she'd nearly finished her shake. He took hold of Poppy's hand and led her to where Chandler stood waiting.

"We done here?"

Chandler took a deep breath. "Yeah. Sorry. Change of plans. We're good."

"What happened?"

"That was my mom. My sister's having pregnancy complications and it's way too soon. It looks like she's going to be all right, but it might require bed rest and home health care, and my mom wants to be there. She and my father are heading to Seattle on the first plane they can get."

"I'm sorry about your sister."

"The doctors think everything will be okay but it won't be easy. My mom wants to help with the older kids. I can see her point. There's four of them."

“What can I do?” Steve asked. Maybe Chandler understood he wasn’t asking lightly, or maybe not.

Chandler squeezed his iPhone between his hands. “If the car’s done, I’ll just head home.”

“All right.”

They both looked down at the same time and realized that Poppy still had a tight grip on Steve’s hand.

“Sorry, sweetheart.” Chandler hoisted her up, shake and all. “Grammy and Pop won’t be home for Christmas after all.”

Poppy leaned over and whispered something in Chandler’s ear that made him laugh out loud. Steve felt the laughter Poppy surprised from Chandler all the way to his toes. It was unaffected and charming. The sound effervesced inside him like champagne. “What?”

“She said we should see if we can spend Christmas with Santa Claus.”

Steve shrugged. “Why not?”

“No, man. She’s... We can’t do that, I’m sorry.” Chandler sighed and headed out of the restaurant and into the night.

Steve followed him, thinking he’d had worse ideas and they’d turned out mostly okay. “Hey, I wasn’t kidding. Why not spend Christmas with me?”

“Weren’t you going to Vegas? I can’t take a little kid to Vegas for Christmas.”

“No. Well, I was going to Vegas but only because I felt like this year wouldn’t be so great. My family is all about Christmas, though. You really could spend it with us.”

“Who is us?”

“I’d tell you but I don’t want to scare you away.” Steve put his hand on the small of Chandler’s back to guide him around a pothole and found it fit there

nicely.

“Tell me.”

“I have four brothers and three sisters and most of them live within a few blocks of one another.”

“No way.”

“It gets worse. There are fifteen nieces and nephews. Some of *them* are married and from those we have three more kids.”

“And you didn’t think you could get into the Christmas spirit?”

“It’s a long story.” Steve didn’t take his hand off Chandler when they got to the car. Chandler held Poppy but Steve only had eyes for him. “I don’t think I’m giving anything away by telling you I like you. You’re a nice guy, and maybe you need someone to take care of you while you take care of Poppy, even if it’s just for a few days. My place isn’t decorated this year but we could fix that. I figure if you—like the song says—need a little Christmas? We’ve got that in spades. What do you say?”

For an answer, Chandler stood on his tiptoes and offered Steve the sweetest, most uncomplicated kiss of his life. Given that it came from a guy who had a whole wagon train full of baggage, the child in his arms notwithstanding, it was all the sweeter for Steve, who admitted that he didn’t like things to be *too* easy.

“Call the tire place. We’ll get your car after Christmas.”

Chandler wore a speculative expression. “It’s my friend Garvin’s car.”

“A car you just put new tires on.”

Chandler shrugged. “Yeah, you’re right. He’s out of town anyway. Merry Christmas, Garvin. New tires.”

“That’s the spirit.” Steve unlocked the door to let Chandler and Poppy into the backseat then stepped away to open the driver’s side door. Chandler caught his hand.

“Not yet, but it will be. Thank you.”

Steve did what he thought of as that odious *aw, shucks* thing, color flooding his cheeks, then got into the car. He waited patiently while Chandler buckled Poppy in and spoke to her quietly for a minute. Steve saw her nod in the rearview mirror.

When he would have started the engine, Chandler stopped him.

“Wait, I’m coming up there.”

“Won’t Poppy be—”

“She’s tired, she’ll sleep for a while. I told her that this time I wanted to sit with you.”

“Well. Good, you can keep me awake.”

Chandler looked back at the diner. “Do you need me to get a couple of coffees to go?”

“No. I was kidding. I’ll be fine.”

Chandler got in the front seat. “Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever been in a car like this...”

Steve started up the engine and drove back out onto the access road, heading for the tire place to pick up Chandler’s things. “If you play your cards right, I’ll let you drive it.”

Chandler had already begun to relax. The tension he’d carried in his shoulders had eased and his secret smile was back, playing now-you-see-me-now-you-don’t, along with what Steve thought might just be a pretty spectacular dimple. He crossed one long, leanly muscled leg over the other and then said primly, “Maybe I’m just as happy if you drive.”

Steve nearly missed a shift and the car shuddered perceptibly. “Yeah?”

Chandler slid under the lap restraint until his head rested against the back of

his seat. “Gods, yes. Maybe I’d be happiest if you drove all the time.”

Steve stared at Chandler’s face for just a little too long. Wouldn’t you know, even out in the sticks someone was going to honk if you missed your chance at a green light. “I could do that.”

Bingo. *Dimple*. Chandler’s eyes started to close. “I can tell.”

Steve hesitated. What exactly were they talking about? “I like to drive.”

“I can tell that too.”

From the backseat, which he’d forgotten existed, Poppy said, “Not a sleigh, though...I wanted a sleigh.”

It was only minutes before they got to Axis Tires, and in no time they had Chandler’s things, including presents he’d obviously been taking for his family and Poppy, in the trunk of the Bee. Poppy was already sound asleep. She’d drifted off the first minute and hadn’t come back up for air, even when they stopped, even when they slammed the trunk lid closed. They stood in the corner of the nearly deserted parking lot while one lonely guy shifted tires around in the open garage bay.

Chandler locked up Garvin’s Honda and came back to where Steve stood in back of the Bee, flicking his lighter open and closed.

“That’s everything.” Chandler didn’t quite meet his eyes.

“Are you nervous about something?”

“No.” Chandler wrapped his arms around himself.

“You don’t really know me.”

“I know that.”

“I could be a serial killer or something, and now you’ve agreed to go with me, in my car.” Steve held a hand up to stop Chandler from interrupting him. “Hear me out. I know it’s dark and scary and we’re in the middle of nowhere, but I

won't let you down. I really do have a big family, and they will welcome you with open arms."

"Thank you." Chandler rose to his toes for another peck but this time Steve was ready. He wrapped his arms around Chandler and tilted his head so he could deliver a kiss that said something about what he wanted or—face it—*who* he wanted.

Kissing Chandler was ridiculously easy and rewarding as hell. Steve moved his hand up to cup Chandler's face, then dug his fingers into his soft dark hair. Chandler's mouth opened beneath his and a small moan escaped him. He melted against Steve like wax. Their tongues touched and explored as Steve tried to get all the awkward first-kiss clichés out of the way. They moved on to breathing and nipping and nuzzling in unison until Chandler gripped the front of Steve's shirt to stay standing and Steve wanted to push him onto the trunk of his car and do him right there.

"*Gods*," Chandler whispered when they broke apart. His hand covered his swollen lips for a few seconds, but when it dropped back to his side, he was smiling.

Steve picked up Chandler's hand and pressed it to his frantic heart. "Best. Kiss. Ever."

Chandler's eyelids lowered and he leaned back in, but Steve stopped him. "Maybe it would be better..."

Chandler blinked up at him, love drunk and sweet as stick candy. "Oh, *hello*. I'm in a tire warehouse in fucking *Baker*."

Steve grinned. "Me too."

"I'm pretty embarrassed right now."

"Whatever." Steve opened the car door for him. "It's dark and they've probably seen worse."

Steve reached out and cupped the back of Chandler's neck to pull him in for another kiss. This time his lips were languid, slow and sensuous. Kissing

Chandler ignited a long fuse inside him that was bound to burn for the whole ride back to his place.

This time soft hands smoothed the fabric of his shirt instead of wrinkling it, and he got a really good idea what he was in for if Chandler decided to play the tease. Chandler was beautiful too, especially in the golden glow of the Bee's interior lights, which kissed his high cheekbones and the sharpish blade of his nose while causing shadows to pull in the hollows, sculpting his face more severely in the darkness than nature did by day. It darkened his beard shadow, which grew in heavy and promising. Maybe the rest of him would be covered with crisp dark hair. Maybe he was the kind of guy who didn't bother with manscaping, who didn't mind a guy with some fuzz of his own.

Steve was getting a feeling about Chandler. Maybe he was looking for someone he could lean on a little, someone stable and slow, who would put an arm around him when shit got tough and shore him up, maybe give him a break when he was tired. It wasn't hard for Steve to see himself in that role.

Steve had one of those bright flashes of apprehension—a warning that he was stepping in something here he wouldn't get out of without getting hurt.

The bigger they are, the harder they fall.

Whatever fear he felt got crushed under an avalanche of *oh hell yes*, which occurred right about the same time the back of Chandler's knuckles brushed over his fly. When his knees buckled, he leaned on the Bee's open passenger door.

Chandler's gaze left Steve's cock and seemed to be reluctantly making its way up the rest of his body. When their eyes met, Chandler winked.

"Don't be buying trouble you can't afford, boy."

"Oh, I can afford it." Chandler glanced into the backseat where Poppy slept, filling the car with adenoidal snurgle sounds. "You'll just have to take an IOU."

"I can do that." Steve backed away but Chandler stopped him.

"With interest."

“Count on it.” Steve closed the door and came around to the driver’s side. This time, when he fired up the engine, he revved it a little just to feel the power.

* * *

Chandler leaned his head back against the seat again. He didn’t know which he liked better, the rough growl of the car’s engine or the sweet, slow rumble that was the voice of the big man sitting next to him. All that metal, all those horses, Steve’s big frame and the muscle he carried on it, sinew and bone, steel and high-octane fuel, all combined to sweep him under a heady testosterone cloud.

“It is good to be me today,” he murmured as he felt himself drifting off to sleep.

Chapter Five

As soon as they pulled off the Interstate, Chandler stirred. He'd had a nice nap, considering. He glanced into the backseat at Poppy. She was just like they'd left her, snoozing and drooling, her head cushioned by the high back of the full-size car seat, her hands loosely curled, draped over the sides.

Chandler took a deep breath and eyed the man sitting next to him. Steve concentrated on driving. Now that they were off the highway he had to use the clutch more often. Every move he made was orchestrated, his hands and his feet working together, the car gliding smoothly along, fast, slow, start, stop, gear up, gear down. His forearms rippling where he gripped the shift knob, which was little more than a rod that came up from the floor. *Cool.*

Guys he'd dated drove all kinds of cars, but there seemed to have been a lot of automatics. He had a vivid memory of a boyfriend's Honda S2000 though, and the buzz that a hot car—in the hands of a man who knew how to drive it—evoked in him were multiplied exponentially, somehow, when it was a man like Steve.

They'd gotten off the highway in a small town with old-fashioned buildings and vintage neighborhoods. Signs indicated that at one time it had been part of historic Route 66. Mom-and-pop businesses were decorated for Christmas, and the signs, lots in English but as many in Spanish, proclaimed the season with sales, deals and special events. They drove past several neighborhoods with houses draped in Christmas lights and finally pulled in to one, edging their way past one small Craftsman-style home after another. There seemed to be an awful lot of traffic, and he wondered about that, until they got to an area that was clustered with houses where people had...*seriously*...way too much time on their hands.

Way too much.

It was slow going through the neighborhood because some of the houses had the most amazing if over-the-top decorations he'd ever seen. One had lights everywhere, on every surface, with wires running from the light post out front to

the home's red brick chimney. A life-size Santa sleigh complete with eight reindeer and a Rudolph with a blinking red nose were strung between them.

"Wow." Chandler couldn't help but say something. "That is..."

"My brother Dave's place."

"No." When Steve didn't say anything, Chandler turned to look at him. "No shit?"

Steve pointed out another house, six doors down, where someone had one of those light things that made it look like it was snowing, and a giant blow-up snow globe in which penguins seemed to be ice skating. "That's John's. He's the baby."

"Are you *kidding* me?"

"Mark's is coming up in a minute. He's all about control," Steve followed traffic at a snail's pace. While all the houses were decorated nicely, even maybe a little heavily, the homes of his brothers seemed to take things to a ridiculous extreme. "So when we turn the corner here, you'll see his place. He has one of those sound systems that synchronize the lights to create a bit of a show."

People had stopped their cars to watch. Chandler was likewise curious. Vince Guaraldi music filled the air, and the lights marched and danced along to it, blinking on and off like digitized fireworks. The cycle seemed to last about three minutes and then the house went completely dark.

"Mark had to make it a short cycle and do a one-minute break in between because no one could get through on this street when he originally wired that up. He did it to Pachelbel's Canon in D and you could only get through here on foot. He and his neighbors had words."

"I don't doubt it for a second."

"Too bad your Poppy's asleep. She'd probably like this." Steve put the car back in gear when the traffic started to move again. "We'll take her tomorrow night if you want. We can walk..."

Chandler turned to look at her. Still in the same position, mouth open, snoring. “Yeah, she’d like that. She’s a weird kid—once she’s asleep you can’t wake her with a bomb until morning.”

“Yeah?” Steve glanced at him and all of a sudden it was there between them again, the heat and excitement that had crackled through the air when their eyes met over Poppy’s head in the restaurant. “That could be a good thing.”

Chandler froze when Steve’s fingers brushed his knee. They traveled up and over his thigh, doing an inexorable slide toward his cock, dipping in to find his inseam. And oh, how he needed it. If they were alone, he would have slipped down in his seat, loosened his button, unzipped and shifted until Steve could slip that big square hand down into his jeans, inside his shorts, and rub his dick. It wasn’t hard to imagine it, the heavy hand that had such a delicate touch, wrapping around him or cupping his balls, one meaty finger slipping behind them to insinuate itself in his more private places. Chandler swallowed.

“No, wait...” He caught Steve’s hand. “Not that I don’t want it, because I do, you have no idea. But I can’t. Not right now. Not until I know Poppy’s safe and she isn’t going to wake up and find us going at it or something.”

“I’m sorry.” Steve pulled his hand back.

“You get that I’m not saying no, though, right?”

Steve glanced at him. “Yeah. I get that. Time and place. My bad. That one—” He pointed out a house where the lights, millions of them, were all blue and white. “That’s my sister Kelly and her husband, Jim. Jim is Jewish, so they compromise during the holiday season with blue-and-white lights. There’s the menorah, see?”

“You guys really take this...” They turned a corner and passed another highly decorated house. It had the lights, the music and a massive nativity made out of wire and lights, with animated deer that nibbled on grass around the holy family, who looked down at baby Jesus in the manger. “Is that one of yours?”

“Nah. That’s Bill Cove’s place. He’s just a competitive prick.”

Chandler didn’t know how he managed not to laugh. “I see.”

“He’s still pissed that Kelly wouldn’t go to prom with him.”

“So his...his is tacky.”

“Well, yeah. Of course it’s tacky. He doesn’t get it at all. Michael’s.” He pointed to a house that had a Warner Brothers theme. Big wooden cutout cartoon characters chased one another around the house and up the side, where they formed what looked like a hunting party led by Elmer Fudd, who held a sign that said, “I’m hunting Weindeer.”

“You people are *hilarious*. I’ll bet you get on the news, huh?”

“Yeah. We’ve been on all the local news channels and in the papers a lot over the years. My mom keeps a scrapbook. We’re almost to my place, do you want to go there or would you like to see the rest?”

“How many more are there?”

“Just my folks’ place. Two of my sisters live out of state.”

“So, let me see, there’s Michael, Dave, Mark and John. Kelly and two more? Plus you?”

“Fiona and Sophie. Big family. I know. We’re the local chapter of the Irish mob.”

“I just have one brother and one sister.” Chandler felt that sock to the gut that he always got when he remembered. “*Had.*”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Now my sister Courtney’s in the hospital and she might be having her baby prematurely.”

“Do you know which hospital? You could call from my place as soon as we get home.”

“Thanks, I will.”

“So? My place or look around some more?”

“I think we should go to your place. I need to get Poppy settled and find out how Courtney’s doing.”

“All right. I have a spare room and you guys could share it.”

“Thanks for that. Poppy can take the bed. I can sleep on the couch or the floor.”

“I have an air mattress one of you can use and then you could stay in the same room together. Either way, it’s up to you. I’m easy.”

That sounded so reasonable. Chandler peeked back at Poppy. “Can I tell you something? I’m a little stressed out about having Poppy.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to mess up,” Chandler admitted.

“Most people worry about kids. Were you and your brother close?”

“Yeah.” Chandler tried to find the words to describe his brother. Two years older, organized, intelligent, hardworking. Genuinely caring. “I think he was my best friend. My mentor. My rock. They asked me to be Poppy’s godfather and I was so honored.”

“But you feel like you might screw up? Is that because you don’t know much about kids? Or you think you might have problems because of what other people say about a single man raising a kid?”

“Both. They wanted it to be me. They even made a videotape, where each one of them said why they thought it was in Poppy’s best interest to stay with me.”

“So you only have to worry about common-sense things. You’ll get used to having a kid. It’ll get easier. Most things do.”

Chandler was just about to tell Steve that getting used to having a kid wasn’t what he was worried about when Steve pulled the car to the curb in front of a

pretty little house. Very like the others, it was a typical Craftsman bungalow with a nice front porch. It stuck out in this festive neighborhood because it was unlit and undecorated, as remarkable as a tiny cactus plant growing in some lush tropical rainforest when you considered the ones belonging to his siblings.

“This is yours?”

“Yeah. Surprised, huh?” Steve pulled the keys from the ignition and got out.

“A little. I thought you’d be...more like your family. Awash with Christmas lights. Laden with decorations.”

“I am. Usually.”

“So what happened?”

“I’ll tell you some other time. We’ll get your things and get you settled, and then I’ll pull my Honeybee into the garage. I’ll have to move my truck.” He waved the driveway. “That’s my work truck. It makes the place look like someone’s here when I’m not.”

Chandler read the sign on the door of the neat white utility truck. “Steve’s Painting Service? You have your own business?”

“Yeah.”

The truck featured a splashy rainbow pattern over the back fenders. “Not exactly subtle.”

“People do see me coming. A colorful truck puts me in people’s memories in a good way. They don’t always associate painting with a pleasant experience. I have this truck and four panel vans. It’s usually a pretty busy gig.”

“How many people work for you?”

“I have about ten regular painters, a woman who handles phones and accounts, and a Rolodex full of independent drywall and texture guys. But it’s slowed a lot since the economy went into the toilet. It slows during the holidays too, which I like.” Steve pulled Chandler and Poppy’s bags from the trunk of his car. “Let’s

get you guys inside and settled. I'd love an ice-cold beer."

"Oh, me too. I don't suppose that would be a bad thing. I mean just one."

"Sure, why not?"

"I don't know. What if something happens and Poppy needs me? What if I have to drive her somewhere?"

Steve's eyebrows rose. "How much does one beer affect you?"

"Not much, I guess. I drink a lot more than that sometimes. I don't drive, but I'm fine. I'm just...nervous."

"Have you been this tense since you've had her living with you?"

"I guess so. I've never been responsible for a kid before. I don't know what to expect."

"Expect the unexpected." Steve's smile was slow and sweet. "But it's going to be fine, you'll see. Everyone gets a little scared going in. I'll take the bags, you bring your girl, all right? The bed's made up and it's clean, so you can just pop her in there and have a beer with me. If we need to drive somewhere and we're not fit to do it, although I doubt one beer would make that much difference, I have a neighborhood full of people who can help."

"Thanks, I am so glad you came along." Chandler leaned in and unstrapped Poppy. She was the type of kid you could transfer from a car seat to a bed without waking. His brother and sister-in-law always joked about how lucky they were that she slept so well. For Chandler, since he was the type to study all possible outcomes of any situation, good or bad—what his brother had called finding a silver lining and looking for the cloud—her knack for sleeping so soundly sometimes kept him awake.

Chandler worried about things. Burglars and smoke detectors that might not wake her up, or...he didn't even know what. But something about how trusting she was, how she fell asleep in his arms and counted on him to keep her safe through anything—bad decisions, illness, bogeymen, and acts of nature...that humbled him. And it scared the shit out of him.

“No problem.” Steve locked up the car and led him up a nice little landscaped path to the front door. When they got close, the porch light turned on, giving Chandler a start.

“Oh.” He jumped back.

“Jeez. Would you relax? It’s on a motion sensor.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it, Chandler. I’m really happy to help. And I like you. A lot. Why don’t you consider leaning on me a little this weekend? Two pairs of hands and eyes, two brains. You can relax. Maybe I can get my mom and sisters in on it, and we can give you a break, all right?”

Inexplicably, Chandler wanted to refuse Steve’s offer. “It’s not that it’s so hard to take care of her. She’s great. She’s terrific. I really love her so much. I’m just —”

“Shh. It’s all right. We all need a little break sometimes.” Steve opened the door and tripped an alarm system sensor. A shrill whistle filled the air. He motioned Chandler in. “Second door down that hall on the right. I’ll get the alarm.”

“Thanks.”

Chandler moved through the house, which was lit by square flat nightlights plugged in to outlets wherever he went. He found the second door and entered the spare bedroom. It was pleasant. Chandler pulled the covers back with one hand and held Poppy until he could put her down with the other. He sat next to her and undid her shoes, removing her small lacy socks and tucking them in, leaving them beside her bed.

Steve came in with two more pillows. He kept his voice so low it sounded like a caress when he spoke, raising the hair on Chandler’s forearms and the back of his neck. “Is she a roller? I brought pillows in case. Or I can make up the air mattress so if she falls off she won’t hurt herself. I have a nephew who sleeps like a top. They finally put his mattress on the floor.

“She’s fine like this, I think. If you make up the air mattress, I’ll sleep on the floor in here.”

“Great, we can go into the living room and inflate it and I’ll get you that beer.”

“Gods, yes.” Chandler gave Poppy a light kiss on the forehead and straightened.

“Perfect.”

* * *

Steve had his work cut out for him with Chandler’s nerves. Dave, his older brother, had been the first among them to have kids. He’d gotten his girlfriend pregnant the summer before college. After their kid was born Dave and his wife Alice had seemed practically insane for the first few months between lack of sleep and increased responsibility. Steve had still been living at home back then and their mom had threatened to rip the phone out of the wall if Dave didn’t just relax and learn to trust himself.

Steve didn’t know Chandler all that well, but he seemed like a good guy. Poppy’s parents would hardly have done what they had to ensure that Poppy stayed with Chandler if he weren’t, and where the wife was concerned, that was an even better argument. A mother wouldn’t leave the care of her child to someone just because he was a relative. She had to have trusted him as well. Which probably meant that Chandler just needed to learn to trust himself too...

Steve led the now-quiet Chandler into the kitchen where he took two bottles of Corona from the fridge. “Lime?”

“No, thanks.” Chandler simply looked at the bottle in his hand. Steve took it back and opened it on an old-fashioned bottle opener he had screwed to the wall.

“Oh, hey. Haven’t seen one of those since I was a kid.”

“I keep a Coke machine in the shop out back. With those little bottles, you know? For the kids. They like that. I put an opener in here too ’cause I like imported beer best.”

“That’s cool. May I?” Chandler motioned toward the fridge.

Steve nodded. "Sure. Go ahead."

Chandler opened the door of the big refrigerator, which was on the empty side. He pulled one of the small Coke bottles out and examined it. "This brings back memories of road trips. We'd get to those tiny Midwestern towns, and there'd be a machine in the gas station. Coke, 7UP, Bubble Up. Orange Crush."

"What do you call soft drinks?"

Chandler grinned. "Pop. Why?"

Steve smiled and leaned over to press his lips to Chandler's. He pulled back less than an inch, only enough that when he spoke, *sotto voce*, his lips still brushed over Chandler's. "Because I asked. Because that tells me you're not from around here, where we call them sodas. You don't use *Coke* as the ubiquitous term, and you're not from the South, because you don't say 'a cold drank.'"

"I see." Chandler kissed him back, stepping into him so they were hip to hip,

"I was kidding about that *drank* one, but... Uh-huh."

Oh yeah. Their beers forgotten, they tasted each other. Their free hands followed up, his cupping Chandler's face and Chandler's—wow—was working its way into the waistband of his pants in the back, looking for skin. Steve wished he could ignore the fact that every time they came up for air, Chandler looked over his shoulder to the hallway and the guest room where Poppy was tucked in bed, probably sleeping like the angel she was. Steve wasn't sure Chandler even realized he was doing it. He just couldn't seem to help himself.

"Stop."

Chandler drew back, surprised. "Hmm?" Steve saw him trying to process the word *stop* while his little head was doing his thinking. Apparently it didn't understand. "What?"

"Finish your beer and then I'll show you something, all right?"

"Steve—"

“It’s okay.” Steve leaned over to nuzzle Chandler’s neck. “Take a minute to finish your beer.”

They stood in the kitchen drinking their Coronas in silence until they were drained, then when they’d finished Steve took Chandler’s hand and led him back to the front door. “First, look here. There’s an alarm system. All the exterior windows and the sliders are wired, along with the front door. Nobody gets in or out without us knowing, and it’s on right now, so don’t open windows and doors unless you tell me first, all right?”

“Sure.”

Steve led Chandler down the hall toward the back of the house. “My bedroom is at the end of that hall, to the right. There are smoke detectors in each, one in the hall, and one in the kitchen.” Steve couldn’t help it; he started mimicking a flight attendant. “The exits include the front door, the slider in the kitchen, and that door at the end of the hall, which is a guest bathroom but also has a door leading out to the backyard. There’s a hot tub, but I keep it covered and lock the cover down because kids are in and out of here all the time.”

“So your house is kind of childproofed?”

“I like to keep it pretty safe. Any of the kids can stay here if their folks need a break. I had a nephew who kept getting into trouble at school so he stayed with me for a couple of weeks in October while his folks cooled down. It’s handy, because it’s still in the neighborhood and we’re all family.”

“That’s a good arrangement.”

“They say it takes a village.”

Chandler laughed. “You guys have your own sprawling metropolis.”

“I admit that.” Steve nodded. “But what I wanted to show you is this.” He went to the closet in the hall by the door and pulled out a box. If he could find what he was looking for...

“Ah. Here it is.”

Steve pulled out a large metal loop attached to a long leather strip which had a row of sleigh bells sewn on it. He held it carefully still, and even then its muted jingle was loud in the quiet house. He led Chandler down the hall and gently placed it on the doorknob of the guest room.

“*Voilà*. Early warning system.” He held his hand out to Chandler. “What do you say we go to the living room and canoodle while you’re still young and hot?”

Chapter Six

Chandler let himself be tugged into the living room where Steve maneuvered him onto the long leather sofa. The room itself was comfortably masculine, a little rustic, warm and inviting. Just like the man.

Chandler hadn't had a drink for three weeks and he'd picked at his food, so he had a pleasant buzz going. Most important of all, he felt for the first time in days he wasn't free-falling through space with the certainty that there was an unscheduled and highly painful landing in his near future.

"Gods." He dropped his head forward when Steve massaged the back of his neck. It was such pure bliss, such an unexpected pleasure, he moaned out loud.

"So tight," Steve murmured from a place right next to his ear. There was a richness, a resonance to his voice that was exacerbated by the way he lowered it to keep it quiet. Nothing caught Chandler in the gut like a man's deep voice in his ear. Hot breath on his neck always followed. He closed his eyes and gave in to the pure wicked pleasure of it. Gentle hands turned him a little, and soon they were working all the big muscles in his back. Kneading and smoothing his skin, pulling the tension out of him like an exorcism. "You just relax, now. You're safe with me."

Chandler smiled. "Yeah. 'Cause no one ever lies about that..."

Steve's hands stilled. "You think I'm lying?"

Chandler shook his head, and the hands started up again, magically obliterating his last shred of resistance. "No."

"You are safe here, you know." Steve kept smoothing and soothing, working the lumbar vertebrae and then his lower back, until he gripped Chandler's hips, fitting his fingertips into the hollows of his pelvis next to his dick. Steve paused there without moving, poised, ready to work the fastening, but still for a nerve-shattering, breathless minute. "May I?"

"You're sure we'll hear her?"

“If she opens that door, the people next door will hear her.” Steve kissed Chandler’s neck and rubbed his lips over the skin below his ear. “I’ll be dressed. You’ll grab a throw pillow, and we’re only watching television.”

Chandler gave himself a minute to think while Steve picked up the remote and turned the set on. *Headline News*, with the volume low enough that if Poppy called out for him he’d hear. “All right.”

“Thank fuck.” Steve’s hands slid all the way around Chandler to his fly, where he unfastened first the button and then the zipper. “Thank *fuck*, I’ve wanted to do this since I laid eyes on you.”

With the first electric touch of Steve’s callused hands on his cock—*holy cow*—Chandler’s head fell back on Steve’s muscled shoulder. A bristly chin scrubbed the skin along his neck as soft lips pressed kisses just below his ear. For such large hands, they were gentle—maybe even a little too gentle. Chandler didn’t say anything and even resisted the urge to push into Steve’s hands. Everything felt so good, so right, he thought it would be fine to let it play out, to leave the control to Steve and see where it went.

“Have you got a little buzz on board?”

Steve’s voice could make him come. He was doing that on purpose, rumbling low and slow, his lips and voice arousing one part of Chandler’s body while his hands started to explore.

“Yeah.” Chandler turned his face toward Steve and kissed his chin. One of Steve’s hands cupped his balls, rolling them gently, while the other pulled his cock, a long, tight stoke that ended with the roughness of four fingertips as each one slipped over the tip. Steve did it again, a long pull, and then a twist and stroke over the head. Chandler’s breath hitched. “Ah, yes. Just like that.”

“I’ll take care of you.” Steve turned his head and captured Chandler’s mouth for a kiss that devoured the moans his hands were drawing out.

Chandler’s eyes closed and his spine arched. “Been a while...”

“Let yourself go,” Steve said between kisses. “I’ll catch you.”

Chandler grunted when he felt his control slipping. He grabbed on to Steve's arms where they wrapped around him and held on. The languid stroking gave way to a firmer, faster touch. Steve encouraged him to lift his hips and find his own rhythm, and in very short order he was jabbing his cock into Steve's closed fist. He clenched his teeth and grunted as he blew, hot and sticky, into Steve's hands.

Steve didn't stop kissing him; he didn't move his hands but gentled them, cradling Chandler's softening cock, holding it almost reverently as Chandler's heart rate slowed and his breathing evened out. Steve's touch changed into the sweetest thing, tender and relaxing. It felt like slipping into a hot tub after a hard run.

"Better?"

"Hell yes." Chandler kept his eyes closed and drifted.

Somewhere Steve found tissues and cleaned him up without shifting him from his lap. That deep voice rumbled next to his ear, soothing and erotic at the same time.

"You have a great face. You know that? When you come you look like an angel having some kind of an ecstatic vision... I just noticed a tiny scar on your lip. I plan to kiss that some more later... Kick your shoes off and put your feet up on the couch."

Chandler did exactly that, and when Steve turned him so he was stretched across his lap, his torso in Steve's arms, he didn't complain. He only wound his arms around Steve's neck and tucked his face in.

"Can I stay like this for a while?" he asked. "Is it okay?"

"As long as you like," Steve whispered. "I'm not going anywhere."

* * *

"Have mercy," Steve whispered some twenty minutes later, when Chandler started to snore. He made a patently silly sound, really. Not loud enough to be considered an actual snore, it was more of a suctiony sound, with a sweet little

hitch at the end and then a deep, deep sigh. Steve doubted that Chandler would wake up until morning unless he or Poppy woke him up. He spent what he thought was probably an embarrassingly long time watching Chandler sleep. He hoped Poppy wasn't the kind of kid who would be frightened if she found herself in a strange room. He decided he should wake Chandler in a few more minutes and then help him get that air mattress ready.

It wasn't really necessary for him to be sitting here, holding a sleeping man in his arms, but the feel of it—a heart beating solidly against his chest, the softness of a sleeping man's breath against his neck... He wasn't about to end that too soon.

He'd found it necessary to shift once or twice when Chandler rustled against his cock, and even that, even being aroused with no release in sight, felt good.

"You're just an armful of hot, aren't you?" he whispered. "Hot man, hot water, hot mess."

"Hmm?" Chandler tightened his arms and blinked. "I like your voice. Did I sleep?"

"I think you catnapped." Steve smiled down at him.

"What did I miss?"

"Nothing really. The news. Apparently six people were arrested for starting a naked flashmob in the Glendale Galleria."

"I've been to the Glendale Galleria. A naked flashmob could only improve it."

Steve realized something. "You know? I don't even know where you live."

"Poway." Chandler sat up, tucked himself in and zipped his pants. "Near San Diego."

"That's a long drive, to Pahrump."

"Oh, fuck me, I forgot." Chandler jumped up. "Did my phone ring while I was asleep?"

“No. I’d have woken you.”

“I’m going to call the hospital. I can’t believe I fell asleep like that.”

“I’ll go get that air mattress and pump it up, all right?”

Chandler waved his assent as he thumbed the keys of his BlackBerry, and maybe Steve felt a little dismissed. He turned to walk away but then a hand caught his. He glanced back at Chandler, who pulled him back for a kiss.

“Thank you.” Chandler aimed a series of quick, light kisses at various parts of Steve’s face. Steve felt his cheeks heat but let Chandler have control. “You saw exactly what I needed and gave it without asking for anything in return. Who does that?”

Steve looked down. He wasn’t much good at this part of things. “Apparently I do. It was just a handjob and a nap. You don’t have to be Dr. Phil to figure out that a guy might need that.”

Chandler squeezed his hand. “Don’t do that. You were magic. This whole night, you’ve been so good to us.”

Steve took the compliment like a man, didn’t even utter the *aw, shucks* that wanted so badly to escape him. “Thank you.”

Chandler pressed another kiss to his forehead and Steve figured he’d better go before he started grinning like a clown. Because that was so going to happen, and then he’d have to kill himself.

“I’ll just go get...”

Chandler nodded and took the phone in the direction of the kitchen. “Yes, this is Chandler Tracey and I believe my sister Courtney Wallace is in labor and delivery...”

Steve got the air mattress out of the coat closet and plugged in the pump. While it inflated, he tried to hide his curiosity, tried to quell his certainty that he was already in too deep.

Chandler came back into the living room yawning, but he dropped onto the couch beside Steve with a sigh that sounded like relief.

“So?”

“So. They stopped her labor—we’ve got a reprieve for a while—but it’s going to be touch and go. I talked to Courtney’s husband and he said she’s going to stay in the hospital until they stabilize her blood pressure. It’s not going to be easy on her. But the good news is she and the baby are both okay.”

“Is there anything you need to do?”

“No. My mom and dad are expected to land any minute and they’ll take a cab directly to the house and relieve the person who’s watching the kids. They’re going to stay as long as they’re needed.”

“So you’re really going to spend Christmas with me?”

Chandler yawned again. “Yep. You’re stuck with us.”

“C’mon.” Steve disconnected the pump from the air mattress after testing it for doneness.

“This is cooked. Let’s get it in to the guest room and I’ll give you some linens.”

They maneuvered the twin-size inflatable bed down the hall and Steve held it while Chandler carefully removed the bells from the door. He barely whispered as he put them down on the floor. “These bells are genius, by the way. I was able to relax in a way I didn’t believe I could.”

Steve put the bed on the far side of the guest room and then left to find bedding. When he returned, he tossed pillows and cases to Chandler. He got it made up not a second too soon. The smudges under Chandler’s eyes looked like bruises.

“Get a good night’s sleep.” Steve flashed on the feel of Chandler’s cock in his hands, the memory of feeling him fly apart in his arms. He leaned against the door as Chandler took off his shoes and socks.

“You’ve even got great feet.”

“No.” Chandler looked down then back up. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Perfect everything, if you ask me... Sleep well, lots to do tomorrow.”

“What?” Chandler tucked his socks into his shoes and got up.

“I didn’t decorate my house this year because I thought I wouldn’t be home. But now I have to. It’s a matter of honor.”

“Ah.” Chandler came toward him, a wicked slow grin on his lips. “Honor.”

“Yeah. I have a reputation to live up to.”

“I see.” Chandler trapped him against the wall and kissed him again. The man did some fine kissing. Probably more than anyone Steve had been with for a while. He liked it. “Maybe tomorrow you’ll tell me why you were running away from all this to spend Christmas in Las Vegas?”

Steve’s lips still tingled when Chandler pulled away. “I will. If you still want to know.”

“I want to know everything about you.” Chandler’s lips met his again, sure and strong.

“Okay.” Steve backed out the door, took a last look in. He wasn’t the kind of guy who wondered about fate too much. He didn’t think looking a gift horse in mouth was a great idea. Horses had disgusting mouths for the most part.

But Chandler was another matter. Chandler’s mouth was sweet and supple. He sucked on Steve’s tongue like a promise and invited Steve to fuck his mouth with his own tongue until he was ready to spin him around, right there, and fuck him for real against the wall of his guest room.

And it was for damned sure Poppy wouldn’t sleep through that.

“’Night.”

Chandler's eyes were tired and he looked punch drunk. A little confused.
“Night.”

Steve closed the door behind him and managed not to curse until he got to his own room.

“Fuck. Me.” He threw himself on the bed and held an imaginary conversation.
“No, Chandler. I’m serious...I really mean it. *Fuck me.*”

Chapter Seven

When Steve woke up the aroma that teased him was...pancakes. It wasn't that unusual for him to wake up to someone cooking in his kitchen, mostly because his relatives were frequent houseguests and they all knew he couldn't be bothered with cooking breakfast. But to open an eye and see Chandler and Poppy trooping into his room with coffee and pancakes on a tray, that was...

Chandler froze in the doorway even as Poppy bounced up onto his bed. "Oh, *please* tell me you have pants on."

"I do." Steve froze for a second, then got up holding a pillow over his morning wood. *Look normal. Act natural.* "I should go brush my teeth and put on a T-shirt and then we can...uh..."

Chandler's face had caught fire at some point, maybe when it first occurred to him that some men don't wear clothing to bed, or maybe when he realized Steve was hiding his boner.

"I...oh."

Steve wanted to die of shame.

"Uncle Chandler thought you should have breakfast in bed for being so nice." Poppy spoke up as she luxuriated in his bed. She'd already dragged a nest of pillows around her and was lounging in them.

"It's pretty easy to be nice to you guys," Steve said easily as he left for his bathroom. To himself he whispered, "Boundaries would be good, though."

Once he closed the door he heard some furious whispering, and then Chandler called out to him. "We'll be in the kitchen. When you're ready, we forgot...butter."

"No butter on mine, thanks." Steve wondered if they heard. He sighed when the door to the hallway from his bedroom closed. While he took the fastest shower on record, he couldn't help grinning.

Chandler was new to all this, but his heart was in the right place. Maybe a day or two spent in the company of the Adams family would loosen him up a little. If nothing else, it might provide him with a distraction from the grief and fear Steve sensed in his heart. Plus, with other people around to help him look after Poppy, he might actually get a couple more good nights' sleep.

* * *

Chandler put some melted butter on Steve's pancakes while he rethought heading for his sister's place in Seattle, and his mother. *She* had more sense than to burst into a strange man's bedroom with a five-year-old girl in tow. Steve came into the kitchen, showered—by the look of him—and fully dressed. He glanced at Poppy, who was watching cartoons on a tiny television set mounted under a kitchen cabinet.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am for barging in on you like that."

"No problem." Steve picked up his coffee, which was probably cold by then. *Shoot.*

"I admit I wasn't thinking. It never occurred to me she'd leap up on your bed."

Steve lifted his hand and shot him a sweet smile. "Most people start with infants, Chandler. While they're needy little monsters, they don't get far on foot. Give yourself some time, okay? I don't have kids but I've had plenty of opportunities to practice. It takes a while to get used to thinking like a kid. I promise you'll be great. You're a natural."

Chandler looked over at Poppy and knew doubt was written all over his face. He pressed his lips together but when he met Steve's eyes, it was obvious Steve knew what he was thinking. He didn't know if he could do it. He'd been on his way to his mom's place for Christmas, in part for a break from responsibility, yes, but also...

"You wanted to feed me some pancakes?"

Chandler looked down at his hands, still holding Steve's plate. "Oh, here are yours."

Steve took them from him. "I'm so sorry. I meant to tell you. I can't have the

butter on this. I have to watch what I eat and—”

“Oh no. I’m sorry.” Chandler switched their plates. “I’ll eat these and you can have mine. I...I thought I heard you say to put butter on yours.”

“No. I said ‘no butter’ but it doesn’t matter, thank you for these. Hey. Did I have blueberries?”

“Um.” Chandler flushed again. “Those are currants. You had dried currants.”

“I see.” Steve looked at his pancakes.

“I don’t know how to cook. I’ve never tried dried currant pancakes. I’ve never even *heard* of them. Now I wonder if that isn’t a bad sign. Currants simply seemed more...”

“Festive?” Steve offered.

Chandler nodded.

Steve grinned. “They are that. Festive and fun...” He took a big bite and Chandler saw him blink.

“Oh, they suck, don’t they?” Chandler glanced at Poppy, who’d picked a neat pile of dried currants out of her pancakes and was just starting to eat the remains.

“These are okay but they look like bugs,” she said. “And they don’t go with syrup.”

Chandler nodded, afraid he was going to cry.

“But that doesn’t mean they’re bad, exactly.” Steve washed his down with a swig of coffee.

Chandler put his plate on the counter. “I don’t suppose you can tell me why it matters so much to me one way or the other.”

Steve shrugged. “I can’t.”

“I tell you what. What if Poppy and I take you out for breakfast?”

“Nonsense. We have work to do. These are fine.”

“I don’t mind if you pick the currants out.”

“Not a chance, boy.” Steve took another manful bite while Chandler explored why the word ‘boy,’ spoken in that rich, bittersweet-chocolate voice of Steve’s got him hot every damned time. “I’m eating the pancakes you made for me.”

Chandler felt his cheeks heat again. “Thanks.”

The smile that Steve flashed him held the hint of a serious leer. “You’re entirely welcome.”

Chandler leaned in and lowered his voice. “You know, when you say it like that, those words sound like an indecent proposal...”

Just as Steve was leaning in for a kiss, his phone rang.

Shoot.

“Hello?”

Chandler watched Steve’s expressive face as he listened to his caller.

“Yeah, I decided not to go. Well, I met someone on the way and we came back here.”

Chandler tried not to eavesdrop, but he wondered who Steve was talking to.

“No. Nothing like that...*seriously*...Okay, well. Yeah...” Ah. There went Steve’s cheeks, darkening with a pretty healthy flush. “He has a kid with him, so...No. Of course not. He’s the uncle. There’s no wife. You are such a...Okay, I’ll hold on...” Steve covered the receiver with his hand. “Kelly. My sister. Somebody needed talking to—” he frowned, “—or killing.”

Chandler blinked in surprise. “Should we—”

Steve shook his head a little. “Yeah...He did what? Ha-ha. That sounds like him. I’m about to make your day. I’ve got to decorate, how about you send the

big ones over here for a while?”

Chandler started to say he was prepared to help and they didn't need to recruit someone but Steve held out his hand.

“Cool...Yeah. *Yeah*...No, you can come too, he'll probably want to meet you after he meets your kids.” Steve chuckled. “Role model? Hell no. I can only do *object lesson*.” He replaced the phone in the charger. “My sister is coming in a few minutes with her three oldest. They'll help us put up the lights and the big decorations, but we still need to see about getting a tree.”

“You don't need to go to all this trouble for us.”

“Mostly it's for Poppy.” Steve glanced at her, and his eyes softened right up. “For some reason she makes me feel like it's finally Christmas. It just goes to show, if you need a little Christmas, it always pays to find someone who needs it more.”

* * *

Steve should have warned Chandler about the Adams Family Christmas, but most people who'd never seen it firsthand passed the warnings off as a joke. Kelly knocked smartly on the door with a big festively wrapped tray full of what she called “health yummys” and took over the introductions herself.

“Hi.” She stuck her hand out at Chandler, obviously delighted to meet the man he'd brought home at last. Steve didn't blame her—he'd taken to sneaking them in and out in the dead of night rather than subject them to the scrutiny of his well-meaning family. “I'm Kelly, and this bunch is Clark, Andrew and Meghan.”

All three kids were dressed in jeans and an assortment of Christmas T-shirts. They wore Santa hats and all looked exactly like Kelly. The entire Adams family, actually, seemed cloned, except the spouses. The Adams genes prevailed against all comers...figuratively speaking.

Three pairs of blue eyes studied Chandler. Steve thought the kids' brains might be melting like a wax landscape under an incandescent flashing billboard that read This is Uncle Steve's Boyfriend and They Have SEX.

“So. You guys know the drill. Why don't you three go move the truck out and

start staging areas in the driveway?” Steve pulled a set of keys off a hook on the wall, then tossed them to Clark, the oldest, who caught them neatly.

“Got it.” Clark grinned. As if they were in some holiday army, the three of them marched out the front door together.

“Kelly, could you take Poppy out to the garage and supervise? Tell them I’m going to need the indoor things. If you could ask Clark to bring those down from the shelves in the loft?”

“Sure. No problem.” Kelly smiled at Poppy and held out her hand.

Poppy looked to Chandler for permission...or maybe for reassurance.

Chandler nodded toward Kelly. “You can go with her, Poppy. I’ll be right here.”

Steve nodded. “I need to talk to Uncle Chandler for a few minutes, and then we’ll be right out.” He gave up on trying to eat and picked up his coffee mug. Kelly took Poppy’s hand and they left the way the teens had.

“She’ll be okay with them, right? I mean, your sister won’t mind having Poppy tag along?”

“Kelly loves kids. She’ll be fine.”

Steve could see the tension leave Chandler’s body the minute he realized he was off the clock. It reminded him of how Chandler had melted beneath his hands the night before. He put his coffee cup down.

“You know...” Steve began, “we’re actually alone right now.”

* * *

Chandler glanced around nervously. “But they could come back in at any time.”

Steve’s smile struck him like a lit match and ignited something pretty reckless inside his gut, a slow fuse, burning anticipation and desire in equal measure.

“Yeah.”

Steve grabbed his hand and led him through a door at the end of the kitchen

into a cramped room, like an old-fashioned pantry with shelves full of staples and weird kitchen gadgets, a vintage metal meat grinder and one of those big bar juicers with the lever you pulled down to squeeze oranges.

“This place,” Steve told him, “has the added beauty of a sliding lock, which I installed very high up when I realized that sometimes I might need a time-out more than my nephews and nieces do.”

Without saying another word, Steve fell to his knees and tugged Chandler’s pants open. “Oh, my word, you smell so good.” He pulled his wallet out and tugged out a condom, even as he nuzzled his face into Chandler’s pubic hair, just above his balls.

“*Oh.*” Chandler’s legs buckled and he hit the wall with an embarrassing thud.

“Condom, okay?” Steve’s blue eyes implored Chandler to say yes. “I never... not without one until...”

“No. Yes...yes.” Chandler realized he wasn’t making any sense. “Yes, of course use a condom. Just—”

“Yeah, I got this.” Steve tore the foil packet open and rolled it down Chandler’s length. He got a firm grip on his cock and started by mouthing his balls.

Oh *shit*.

Chandler was torn between disappointment that his cock wasn’t in the sweet heat of that mouth and the mind-boggling pleasure of feeling his balls bobbed around on a skillful tongue. He clutched at the wall while Steve played him like an instrument. Steve mouthed his balls then pulled his jeans and shorts down to get a good grip on his ass while he swallowed Chandler’s cock down to the root. He set up a good rhythm, one that had Chandler content to reach out and pet his head while he relaxed under the increasing suction of Steve’s mouth and the pleasure he got from little nips and licks of Steve’s lips and tongue.

“Oh. Yes,” Chandler hissed, letting his knees bend, sliding several inches down the wall as Steve insinuated a finger into the crack of his ass, gliding it gently along the cleft and circling it around his entrance. “Hey, oh, *ah...*”

Just that touch, that briefest of contact, sent Chandler over the edge. His hips jerked and he spent in Steve's mouth, inside the condom while Steve put a hand up to keep it where it belonged while he lapped at him until he could see and breathe again.

"Oh."

Steve got rid of the condom and tucked him back into his shorts and trousers. Chandler came to his senses and pulled Steve to his feet. "Here." He exchanged places with Steve and started to sink down.

Steve tried to stop him. Chandler was already going through Steve's pockets, looking for his wallet. "Hey, it doesn't always have to be quid pro—"

"Are you kidding? I want this. Do you have another condom?"

"Yeah." He took a second out and gave it to Chandler. "Good thing I carry a backup, but we'd better be quick."

"Got it." Chandler sank to his knees and pulled at the fastenings of Steve's jeans. "Well, hello there. You're gorgeous."

"Thank you."

"I wasn't talking to you." Chandler rolled the condom onto Steve's cock with trembling fingers, then found a much better use for his mouth than talking with it. There were times when he liked to drag things out, but with the possibility of a family member catching them *en flagrante delicto*, he tried to hurry himself up.

The problem was, the possibility of being caught did something for him, amped up his excitement in an unholy way, making him want to draw it out, to shave the time between desire and disaster to microseconds, which was, for him, a hitherto undiscovered kink.

"Oh wow." He spoke around Steve's cock, wondering if those were footsteps he heard, imagining someone coming across the tiled kitchen floor toward the little pantry where he was locked inside, giving a blowjob...

He relaxed his throat and urged Steve to fuck his mouth, trying to give up control, hoping Steve would understand that being used this way was making him hotter than he'd ever been.

"This okay?" Steve's voice was little more than a hoarse whisper when his hands clamped down on either side of Chandler's face and he pressed that big hot dick into Chandler's mouth.

Chandler pushed him back and choked out, "*You*. Make me do it." Then he grabbed Steve's hips and pulled him in tight, swallowing convulsively and trying to control his gag reflex, breathing to accommodate Steve's rhythm. A deep thrust took him by surprise and he gagged.

Steve pulled out and leaned over to kiss him tenderly for a minute while he caught his breath. Warm hands soothed him, stroking his hair, and when he was ready, he opened his mouth again and waited. Steve pushed his cock back in, deep and hard, resisting Chandler's efforts to pull him with his hands until it was absolutely clear that Steve was driving.

Oh, *hell yes*, that was exactly what Chandler wanted. His eyes stung and his jaw hurt but he put his hands behind his back and clasped them together, letting Steve take him, trusting him to learn how far he could push and when to pull back so he could breathe. Soon he was sucking, eyes closed, heart soaring, as Steve's condom-covered cock thickened and warmed in his mouth and Steve vibrated with pleasure.

"Gods, yes," he sighed after Steve pulled out. Gentle hands drew him to his feet and warm arms wrapped around him. "That was..."

Voices could be heard somewhere.

Quick as lightning Steve shoved him out the pantry door, into the harsh overhead light of the kitchen. He stood there, leaning against the wall when Kelly came in with Poppy, looking for Steve.

Poppy's face brightened when she saw him, but his own probably glowed a deep scarlet.

Kelly's eyebrows shot up. "Have you seen Steve?"

“Uh.” Chandler tried to get a grip. “No. I haven’t. I thought he was with you.”

Kelly never took her eyes off the pantry door. “Poppy, honey, could you go check the back rooms?”

Poppy ran down the hallway, during which there was in interminable, excruciating period of silence on his part and a wealth of speculation on Kelly’s. She had lively intelligent eyes, and they teased him like she was his sister, not Steve’s.

Poppy came running back. “He’s not here.”

“Okay, let’s head back into the yard, we’ll look for him there.” Kelly followed along after Poppy—who burst out and into the yard—but turned back when she reached the sliding glass door. “Oh, Chandler...”

“Um. Yes?”

Just act natural. Just act natural. Just act natural.

She mimicked giving head in the most indecorous, outlandish way, using her hand and her mouth, poking her cheek out with her tongue...

Who *were* these people?

“Don’t look now, but you’ve got dick lips, sweetheart.”

Chapter Eight

By midafternoon most of the Adams clan had descended on Steve's house, and besides festooning it with lights and every imaginable tacky holiday treasure he could apparently afford and more food than Chandler had ever seen—even when he'd worked a downtown soup kitchen at Thanksgiving—the truth came out.

Steve Adams was, in fact, a bona fide Santa.

Much to Poppy's dismay, he admitted he wasn't *the* Santa, only one of the helpers. The way Poppy argued with him about that, and the way Steve glowed with pride when she kept insisting he *was* the real Santa, Chandler thought Steve might be a little fuzzy on the facts as well.

He and Poppy had been introduced to Steve's mom and dad, who told him that even as a kid, Steve had enjoyed the role of Santa, so one year they'd given him the Santa suit for his birthday in August. Twenty years and several Santa suits later, he still loved it, except this year was the exception. When Chandler asked Kelly why he chose this year to blow off Christmas, she told him to ask Steve himself.

Which was how he'd come to be sitting in a camp chair with Steve under a big bare tree while they ate their food off paper plates and watched the older kids play roller hockey in the street.

"I've never met anyone who has laminated schematics for their holiday lights." Chandler glanced behind him. The house was ready to go. It hadn't taken that much time to unbox and put all the decorations out, mostly because Steve appeared to be the most organized man on the planet.

"You haven't?" Steve frowned. "How do they do it?"

Chandler waited for Steve to laugh. When he didn't, he said, "Most people just...stick them up. Don't they?"

"I don't know." Steve picked at a casserole of some kind with his fork. "We always have a plan, because we pretty much do the same thing every year.

Putting things up in order and taking the time to put them away properly makes it a lot easier. My dad was a roadie for a while, until he finally settled down. I guess he got that from putting together shows.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, he worked for some big bands in the seventies and eighties. Kiss, Fleetwood Mac, the Pretenders. Bruce Springsteen, Santana...I don’t even remember them all. He slowed down when the family got bigger and he wanted to be home more.”

“Wow. Cool.”

“Yeah.” Steve seemed to be searching for something, then he pointed his dad out. He sat on the curb, watching the kids. “You can blame Himself for my family’s obsession with Christmas.”

“Himself, huh?” Chandler had accepted a beer from one of Steve’s brothers, who were all in Steve’s living room watching a football game. He picked it up and savored it, scanning for Poppy until he found her, getting her chin-length hair glamorized by an Adams preteen with a lot of rubber bands. He’d never figure out to whom each child belonged, but there was a group of girls and they had Poppy and two others—who were barely more than toddlers—with them. They’d been pressed into babysitting by their folks.

Chandler let out a long, contented sigh. He’d hadn’t known such peace since Poppy came to him, and even though it hadn’t been a long time, he knew enough to appreciate the gift.

“As you can imagine, he’s a gadget guy who loves Christmas. He always had to do it bigger and better than the neighbors. But my mom is kind of religious, and she hated the commercialization of a sacred holiday. So they decided they had to do something formal to delineate the boundaries between the sacred and the secular.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Well. We have this bizarre, overtly commercial Christmas and a pretty reverent Easter celebration. Mom’s a devout Catholic, and Easter—the

resurrection—is the holiest day in the Christian calendar. So while you won't see the religious trappings of Christianity at Christmas— just the excess and some of the pagan stuff, the tree, the lights, cartoon characters and Santa Claus—at Easter we don't hunt eggs or do chocolate bunnies or anything, we go to a solemn sunrise service and eat a formal meal together. It's just the way we do things.”

“That has to be the coolest thing I've ever heard.”

“Christmas is a pretty big party around here.”

“The Adam's Family Christmas. I'm going to laugh every time I hear that. You know that, don't you?”

“For a while, yeah. Everyone does.”

Chandler put his fork down. “This is a little overwhelming.”

“Do you need to take a break? We could take Poppy for a drive or something. My family can be a bit...large-ish.”

“I miss my brother so much. We lived close. We'd just had Thanksgiving at my parents' place when they...” Chandler blinked. *Way to ruin a mood.*

“I'm so sorry.”

“I drove separately. I had plans to meet friends in Vegas or we would have all driven together.”

“That's—”

“The luck of the draw, huh?”

Steve covered Chandler's hand with his.

Just then one of the roller hockey players fell. He got up and shoved some other kid who looked just like him, yelling about being hip-checked. Then that person shoved him back and told him to suck it up.

“Knock it off.” Steve’s father’s stentorian voice silenced everyone for a minute, but then the play started up again—business as usual within this big rowdy group.

Chandler had seen indications of Steve’s father’s fading memory over the course of the afternoon. It was barely noticeable but he didn’t know if things would get worse. The adults in the family all covertly watched over him, and his wife hovered by his side. There was so much love. It broke his heart to see the worried glances the Adams children threw their father’s way when they thought he wasn’t looking.

“So are you going to tell me why you nearly bailed on Christmas this year when you all seem to love it so much?”

“You really want to know?” Steve’s blue eyes seemed uncertain. It was obvious that Christmas meant everything to the Adams family. If Steve had run from it this year, there had to be an important reason. From the way Steve had stared at the stars when Chandler first saw him, flipping that lighter open and closed, so lost, Chandler sensed he was unhappy about something. Maybe it was a secret, but he wanted Steve to know he could be trusted with it.

“I like you. Tell me...I want to know.”

“I had some chest pains in the early part of the year and the doctor gave me a scare. There was some blockage, so they did angioplasty and I had to have a stent put into my heart.”

“Really?” Chandler frowned. “You had a heart attack?”

Steve shook his head. “It was leading to that. I had to change my behavior. I had to quit smoking, drop a lot of weight and start exercising regularly. As a consequence of that, I’ve been a little...maybe *ambivalent* about Christmas this year. I used to always dress up as Santa Claus. Then I dropped the weight and I don’t know...I didn’t grow the hair or beard this year. It seemed like a bother. I think I’m having a midlife crisis.”

Chandler suppressed a smile. “You’re probably the only person whose midlife crisis was *caused* by losing weight and getting fit and not the other way around.”

“Maybe.”

“So...are you okay?” Chandler remembered their ferocious pantry sex all too well. “Oh my g—”

“Don’t get nuts, I’m in the best shape I’ve ever been in. I could fuck you longer and harder and in more ways than either of us ever imagined without breaking a sweat.”

Chandler’s beer bottle slipped from his fingers and fell to the grass at his feet with a thud. Good thing it was empty. Unlike his cock, which had chosen that moment to come to life dramatically beneath the paper plate that held his food.

Oh. Holy. Cow.

“Do you promise me?”

“Do I promise to fuck you longer and harder and—”

“Do you promise that you’ve got clearance from your doctor to have sex?”

“I promise...*Roger*, Roger. I’ve got clearance, Clarence.”

“Who the hell is Clarence...?”

“Never mind. There’s no point in worrying about that now, while everyone is staring at us. What do you say we dress Poppy like an elf and go do Santa stuff?”

Chandler thought about it, then shrugged. “Why the hell not?”

“Cool. *That’s* the Christmas spirit. You’re now an honorary Adams.” Steve stood up and called over to Poppy and her babysitters. “I’m going to need some elves. I have room for three, and one of them has to be Poppy. Who’s up for it?”

Some of the girls jumped up and down excitedly. “Can we to go to the mall?”

“Not this time, honey, I’m heading for the shelters.”

They looked disappointed, but they didn’t say no. Two of the younger ones, both of whom had curly blond hair, said, “Okay, Uncle Steve,” nearly in unison.

He grinned back at them and pointed to Poppy. “See if you can find some elf stuff for our guest. You know where Grandma keeps it.”

“Yep. I’ll ask Clark if he’ll drive me to get it.” Eyes that nearly matched Steve’s held nothing but mischief. She must be a handful.

“Tell him he can take my truck. And, princess?”

“Yeah?”

Steve tipped his head and looked down his nose at her. “*Baby*, you’re way too young and that’s your first cousin, so ew. You know? I tell you what, why don’t you start checking out his friends to see what you might like to look for at a later date, okay?”

The girls left Poppy with them and ran off, red faced and giggling. Steve turned to him. “That one’s going to break some hearts someday.”

“What about her uncle? Is that what they said about you when you were her age?”

“Probably not. The whole Santa gig? I was a natural for that. Big, hairy and shy as hell. I’ve come into my own since then.”

“No kidding. So…” Chandler took Poppy’s hand and followed Steve into the house. “You break any hearts lately? Are you planning on it anytime soon?”

“No broken hearts on my watch.” Steve took Chandler’s free hand and gave it a squeeze. He pulled at it until he had Chandler’s full attention. “Not yours anyway. The jury’s still out on my parents’. And my own heart could get seriously damaged here. You’re about to find out how weird I am.”

* * *

Steve led Chandler and Poppy into the guest bedroom where he stopped in front of some folding closet doors. They stretched across the entire room, and when he pushed them open they revealed a solid wall of Santa toys, costumes and paraphernalia.

Poppy's mouth formed a small O of surprise, and Chandler barked out a laugh. "Wow. This is like the bat cave. I keep expecting to find the suit on a mannequin, or robots that come out of the floor and dress you, like Iron Man."

"I've been collecting this stuff since I was a kid."

"I can see that." Chandler stroked his finger over a metal lunch box that featured a fifties-style Coca-Cola Santa Claus."

"Did you carry this at school when you were a kid?"

"Hypothetically speaking, would you think it was cool if I had?"

Chandler snorted, then covered his face. "You are the cutest man ever. *Gods.*"

Steve tried not to let that go to his head, but he failed miserably. He bit his lip to keep from smiling, pulled what he needed out of the closet and tossed it onto the bed where Poppy had slept the night before. "For once, the weather is cooperating. Last year it was in the high eighties, and I thought I was going to blow a pressure gauge in my brain."

Chandler sat on the bed, curling his fingers through the soft white fur of the cuffs on his Santa suit. "Nice. Faux fur. It's cruelty-free and easy to spot clean."

Steve couldn't tell if Chandler was teasing him. "We don't do a whole lot of fur. My folks are old hippies."

"I'm so glad. It wouldn't be right if Santa had like, deer heads on his wall or something. A stuffed-and-mounted grizzly bear."

Poppy fixated on a cowboy Santa toy, which she peered at while holding her hands behind her back. *Good kid.* She didn't just maul his stuff like some of his nephews had when they were little. "There's a switch on the back, Poppy. He dances. You can turn him on if you like."

Poppy found the switch and toggled it. She looked up at Steve. "He's not skinny either. How come you are?"

"I had a problem in the beginning of the year and the doctor told me I had to

lose weight to get better.”

“Oh. I get it.” She waved at the swinging, singing Cowboy Santa and he started a song that made her laugh while swiveling his hips provocatively. “That’s okay, then.”

Steve picked up his gear. “Why don’t I just take these to my room and change? I’ll meet you out here in a minute.”

He left Chandler and Poppy in the guest room with his toys. Their laughter followed him down the hall. It was nice, hearing that—friendly and fun—and in Poppy’s case rare. But hearing Chandler’s light musical laugh, a sound so pure and sweet when something really got to him... That was good for Steve’s soul. He could get used to that.

Once in his room Steve made short work of putting on his Henley and trousers. Everything had to be cinched in—belts tightened, suspenders shortened. The coat would be way too big around the middle, but the boots still fit perfectly. He hadn’t put the suit on since the previous Christmas, and he was afraid that beyond not fitting properly, his suit would just *feel* wrong.

Maybe he couldn’t wear it any more. Maybe it didn’t belong to him because he’d gone from gonzo party boy—the “Hell-Raiser Santa”—to a healthy, responsible and maybe even mature man. At last he realized what had been at the heart of the trip to Vegas in the first place.

Steve Adams had changed.

He might not like it, and he was for damned sure not going back to his old lifestyle to have a heart attack, but all the grilled fish and gambling in the world wasn’t going to bring back the man he used to be because the changes went beyond the physical. He could no longer outrun the clock or block out the loud tick-tock of his lifespan. Someday everything would end.

He stared at the man in the mirror for a long time, wondering when it would kick in that he was wearing his own clothes, that those were his eyes, his mouth, his *face* that he was looking at, even though it seemed as if a stranger looked back at him.

A sharp rap on the door got his attention. “Steve?” *Chandler’s voice.* “Can I come in?”

“Sure. I’m decent.” He turned away from the mirror.

Chandler came in alone. “Poppy’s with the blonde girls.”

“Lynnette and Angela. Angie...”

“Ah.” Chandler drew closer, then reached out and curled his fingers around Steve’s suspenders, giving them a tug. “Nice. Until this moment, I had no idea how much a Santa suit resembles firefighting gear.”

“Yeah. I’ve never thought about that either, but you’re right.”

“I think firefighters are hot. But you, my friend...” Brown eyes scanned him from boots to hair, stopping for a bit in all the good places.

“Am I hotter than a firefighter?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it the hat?”

Chandler moistened his lips with his slick pink tongue. “There’s a whole *je ne sais quoi* here, Bubba, but I’d have to go with the boots. If you keep those clean, I’ll be on my knees later licking them.”

Ah, yeah. That would be... “Didn’t you know? You’re supposed to *lick* where I tell you to lick.”

“Fat chance, skinny Santa.” Chandler had a way of tilting his head down and looking up at him that stopped his heart. “I’ll lick what I like.”

“If you keep looking at me like that, I won’t be able to leave this room.

“I guess the North Pole isn’t just a river in Egypt, Mr. Claus.”

“Huh?”

“That sounded better in my head...”

“Kiss me.” Steve pulled Chandler into his arms and pressed his lips to Chandler’s until he opened beneath the tender assault, sending his tongue out to play, wrapping his arms around Steve’s neck and kissing him back with a desperation Steve felt all the way to his toes, which curled. Seriously, *curled*, inside his boots. Their noses bumped and their beards rasped together, and it felt just as thrilling, just as exciting and dangerous as anything he’d ever done in his life. Simply kissing Chandler Tracey felt like flying and falling and landing on a soft cloud of *hell, yes*.

Finally Steve made himself stop before his fingers started inching into Chandler’s jeans. He needed to pull away before he blew Chandler again—this time with children waiting for them outside the door. He backed off mere inches, then pressed his forehead against Chandler’s and dragged in a deep breath.

“Wait.” Chandler panted. “I...wow.”

“It’s a shame we have to go, but our elves are waiting.”

* * *

“‘And it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.’” Steve quoted Dickens as he barreled through a group of surly skateboarding teens outside the grocery store. Chandler watched the elf girls follow behind him, giggling.

“Hey, Santa,” one of the tough kids called, “I need five bucks for a pack of cigarettes and another ten for some brews.”

The others laughed. Chandler’s heart sped up a little when Steve froze and turned toward the kid. He’d heard cruelty in that laughter and guessed that dressing as Santa put a target on Steve’s back with some of the bullies in town. Of course, Steve was huge and strong as an ox. But he wondered if—like his—Steve’s memories of being the odd guy out came back quick, and the knowledge that he could protect himself from attack sort of ambled along behind it uncertainly.

“Ho, Ho. *Ho*.” Steve leveled an amused and tolerant look at the kid. “Don’t make me leave you coal, boy.”

Another kid asked, “What’s with the new look, Santa? Didn’t you have a beard last year?”

Steve grinned. “I had to roll with the times. What can I say? All the hotties dig a naked face. Here’s the deal. If you can tell me what your favorite candy bar is—and why—without saying *um*, *like* or *you know*, I’ll buy it for you. You have one minute. Go.”

The kid hesitated for a second and looked to his friends for help. None of them knew what to make of Steve, but he finally blurted out, “I like Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups because they come two in a package and my brother Dan used to buy them and save one for me.”

“What’s your name, kid?” Steve asked.

“Todd.”

“Okay, Todd, do you think your friends are too cool to get a candy bar from Santa?” Steve offered the same challenge to them. In the end he bought six candy bars and somehow remembered each kid, each name and which candy bar they asked for. He also bought about three hundred full-size candy canes to give away. While Chandler and the elves put those in the trunk of the Super Bee, Steve managed to coax a skateboard out of one of the kids. He performed a couple of tricks on it, then stomped the back of it with his booted foot, causing the front to leap into his hand before he handed it back.

“Here you go, kid. Stay in school, work hard, blah, blah blah. You know the drill. Don’t do dumb stuff...” He waved goodbye and left something behind him—a little magic, a little happiness that was unquestionably, uniquely his to give.

In that moment, which came suddenly and without any fanfare whatsoever, Chandler Tracey fell in love. He realized he wanted a piece of that solid certainty—that simple goodness—so badly it made his throat ache. When it came time to leave, Steve’s gaze met his over Poppy’s head while they buckled her into her car seat. Chandler took hold of his collar and hauled him in for a kiss that felt desperate and stupid, yet meaningful because he imbued it with more honesty than he had ever given to anyone.

But he said nothing. For once he was all out of words.

Chapter Nine

One of Steve's clocks had bells that struck on the quarter hour. Chandler hadn't really noticed it much the night before, but now every sound—the nuance of traffic outside, the party going on three doors down, the trembling, achy original vinyl recording of Nat King Cole singing “The Christmas Song” that played on the old-fashioned phonograph—touched his senses like a feather, tickly and light, making his blood rush and switching his libido into overdrive.

That afternoon they'd gone to the homeless shelter, where people recognized the Super Bee as soon as Steve roared up and parked. Before they could even get out of the car, two volunteers came out to help them, greeting him with surprise and pleasure. They'd been planning a holiday party with gifts donated by local churches, but the man who planned to play Santa couldn't have been happier to cede the job to Steve, who took over and worked the room like a professional emcee.

People loved Steve's Santa gig so much, it amazed Chandler that he'd nearly given it up. Poppy and the two older girls thrived on the attention. One of them gave Poppy a “magic wand” so that everywhere she went she left behind clouds of iridescent soap bubbles. Steve did exactly that with happiness, leaving smiling, laughing people in his wake. He talked, he listened and he cared. It wasn't hard to figure out Steve's secret. They'd gone all over the place—retirement homes, long-term-care facilities, a hospice-care facility—and everywhere it was the same thing. Steve gave his heart and people simply fell under his spell.

Chandler waited while Steve pulled a couple of Coronas from the fridge and cut up a lime. When he poured himself a shot of tequila, he offered one to Chandler.

Chandler shook his head. “I can't.”

“One shot? It's midnight. Even if your girl wakes up, one shot isn't going to turn you into drunken Uncle Chandler. You'll be fine.” Steve shot his drink and bit the lime. “It's better with salt. I miss that shit. You sure?”

“I just can’t.” Chandler picked up his beer and squeezed a lime wedge into the neck.

“This is fine.”

Steve’s big body dropped into a club chair across from where Chandler sat on the couch. He was magnificent. He still wore the red Henley that looked like long underwear and a pair of loose-fitting button-front jeans that didn’t always ride high enough on his hips to cover the narrow line of tantalizing flesh that stretched between his hips above his pubic bone. His big feet were bare and even those made Chandler hot, especially when he imagined them rubbing along the backs of his thighs or pressed against the muscles of his chest while he rocked his cock into—

“I know your life has taken what seems like a pretty drastic turn—”

Chandler gripped his beer. “My deal. My problem.”

Steve frowned. “Is that what she is for you? A problem?”

“No...yes.” Chandler studied the beer in his hands, reading the nutritional information. “I don’t know.”

“It’s obvious you’ve been pretty tense about this.”

“Hell yes, I’m tense.” Chandler picked at the foil. He didn’t look up. “I mean, I was glad to be Poppy’s godfather. Delighted that they trusted me with that. I love that kid, and I’d do anything for her, but when you think about it, *if* you even think about it, guardianship is an abstract idea. What are the chances that both parents...you never expect—I never even imagined...”

“But now?” Steve prompted him.

“Now I...” Chandler’s eyes burned. “I don’t know if I can do this. I don’t know if I’m the right person. There’s so much. She’s a girl, for fuck’s sake. A *little* girl, and surely there must be someone better than me. Someone who can —”

“Your brother and sister-in-law *chose you*. Don’t you think they asked

themselves who would be the very best choice? Don't you think they agonized over that?"

Chandler rubbed his eyes. "Yes... But no, they probably didn't imagine, any more than I did, that it would ever come to this, really."

"For what it's worth, I think you have it in you."

Chandler got to his feet and walked to the window, where he peered out at the street. Cars were parked along both sides, both ways, as far as he could see. Big party.

This was going to hurt.

He turned back to Steve and finally looked him in the eye. "You don't know me, Steve. I'm not that guy. I know you're from this big crazy family and you live like some happy commune where everyone raises all the kids, but where I come from it's just me. And I'm probably a loser and a selfish son of a bitch, but I didn't expect to have a kid dropped in my lap and, even though I love her, the responsibility is killing me."

"Chandler, I don't know why you think I would judge you—"

"I'm not Santa Claus. I'm not even real sure why people *want* kids. I have this life I like, see, and if Poppy comes to live with me, it's over. I have to find decent daycare, which I can't really afford unless I use Poppy's inheritance... I'd have to take her before work and pick her up after, so she'd spend a full day with strangers. I can't cook worth a damn, and I have to revamp my apartment or move in to her parents' house—my brother's place. All his things are there, and I can hardly bear the thought that he's dead, Steve. I can't bring myself to go in there and look around, because then it will be real."

"Chandler, there are people who can help you, people who—"

"I don't want help. I already feel like a shit heel. I don't want to have to tell any more people that when push came to shove, I didn't measure up. I *won't* measure up no matter what because I'm..." Chandler pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. "It's not that I'm not ready, it's that I'm never going to be ready. I will never be good enough to take this on. I was heading for Pahrump to

leave Poppy with my folks. They didn't know, but I just can't do this."

"I don't know what I should say." Steve's face held only compassion and Chandler hated him for it.

"Say what you're thinking. You expected better. I'm disappointing everyone, I know. But no more than I've disappointed myself." Chandler put his beer bottle into the trash, then left Steve alone in the living room to think over what he'd said. While he checked on Poppy and got ready for bed, he tried not to recall the look on Steve's face, still warm yet sad, as he'd left the room. He brushed his teeth, barely able to look at his own reflection in the mirror.

Sure, Steve didn't judge him. He *probably* didn't. Steve was far too good a man, too genuine and full of empathy. But that was an awfully lofty height from which to look down at an ordinary man—at a boyfriend—and Chandler didn't have any illusions about how very ordinary he was. Steve needed someone extraordinary and Chandler wasn't that man. He fell prey to common, sad little fears and had a strong aversion to responsibility. It didn't take a rocket scientist to see that he wasn't exactly Mrs. Claus material.

However, when he left the bathroom, he found Steve outside the door waiting for him. He only had the briefest second to glance at the doorknob to the guest room—to see the sleigh bell early-warning-system hanging there—when Steve pushed him against the wall and kissed him as if his life depended on it.

"Steve—" Chandler broke the kiss and gave Steve's pecs a little shove. It didn't budge the man. All over-six-feet of him leaned in, curving around Chandler like a big sexy question mark, nudging his knee between Chandler's legs.

"Shut up and kiss me." Steve's muscled thigh pressed deep into Chandler's crotch.

Chandler arched involuntarily and gave up a sigh. "Yeah."

"Maybe you don't need my advice or my approval but it's pretty clear you wouldn't mind my cock up your ass."

"I didn't mean it like that, Steve. I just meant—"

“Never mind what you meant.” Steve pulled Chandler to him by asserting a mighty kung fu grip on his ass. “It’s no secret I want you.”

“No.” No, that cat had definitely left the bag. Steve’s cock was hard, poking over the waistband of his jeans, glistening with a sticky pearl of—

“And it’s not much of a stretch to think you want me back.” Steve’s fingers brushed over Chandler’s cock, which waited, thick and erect, behind the flannel of his sleep pants.

“Come here.” Steve took his hand and pulled him into the master bedroom. He locked the door behind them, then pulled Chandler to the bed.

When Chandler would have glanced back at the door, Steve caught his face between big square hands and kissed him tenderly. He set the pace, breathing Chandler in, bumping noses and rubbing their bristly faces together, grinding against him until both men’s hips were in play.

Chandler lightly explored Steve, moving his fingers over the crisp brush of Steve’s flat top, then following the contours of his head to his neck, his shoulders, along those great pecs to his firm abs, then around back to the ass that powered the rocking motion driving Steve’s hips into his.

“Take off your clothes,” Chandler whispered, thinking that if this was his chance, he wanted that big body covering him skin to skin.

Steve started by pulling off his Henley, then helping Chandler remove his T-shirt as well. Their chests brushed together, crackling, hairy, electric, as Steve maneuvered Chandler down on the bed to pull his sleep pants off.

“Oh, jock. Love that.” He pressed a hot openmouthed kiss to Chandler’s cock through the thin cotton fabric, mouthing his balls, tasting him, insinuating his fingers under the web of elastic in back and up and down Chandler’s crack.

“Ah.” Chandler’s hips jerked when Steve’s index finger brushed over the delicate skin behind his balls. Between the pleasure of Steve’s mouth and his insistent fingers, Chandler couldn’t find a coherent word. Reasons to stop before they got too far along paraded themselves before him, not the least of which was

the possibility of Poppy waking up, leaving her room and coming to find him. That fabulous long callused finger breeched him for the barest instant, firm and gentle at the same time, causing Chandler to cry out. “Ah yes...mmm.”

“What do you say, Chandler?”

“Yeah.” Gods, yes.

The pleasant press of Steve’s weight left him for a minute while Steve pulled his jock off and got rid of his own jeans and shorts. He fumbled around in the nightstand drawer and came up with a strip of condoms and a bottle of lube, then Steve was on him again, nuzzling in, kneeing into the V of his thighs and rubbing their naked cocks against one another. “Steve.”

“Hey,” Steve acknowledged him. He nipped teasingly at Chandler’s throat, mouthing, then licking at his Adam’s apple. His lips trailed a sensitive path under his jaw, back to his ear, and he whispered, “Where do you want me?”

“Everywhere.” Chandler breathed a sigh against Steve’s temple. “I want you all around me and inside me. I want to feel you next week.” *Forever.*

When they pressed their lips together, Chandler wondered if Steve understood how much he needed this. How very long Chandler would hold on to each and every single second he got to spend with Steve like this, how much he appreciated Steve’s gentle hands, his soft lips, the brush and crackle of body hair, and the fact that, as far as he knew, they only had this one weekend to get it right.

Steve surprised him by saying, “Chance meeting.”

Chandler stopped in the act of rolling a condom down Steve’s cock. He met Steve’s gaze with his own. “Yeah.”

“Could be a ships-in-the-night thing.”

Steve’s fingers, now slickly coated with lube, found his entrance and prepared him carefully. They worked and stretched him until he had to grit his teeth against crying out from the sheer unbearable tension that seemed to build inside his spine and squeeze his balls.

“Ships,” Chandler echoed, holding his legs behind the knees to give Steve a private, all-access pass to the most intimate parts of his body.

“But I don’t think so.” Steve pulled his hand out and pressed back in with his cock, ratcheting up Chandler’s pleasure while at the same time confusing him with that burning hint of pain that always accompanied it, until he made it past the tight ring of resistance to seat himself fully inside. Chandler gasped in a gulp of air. “I think we lucked into something good.”

“Good,” Chandler repeated, locking his ankles at the base of Steve’s spine. He reached with his mouth for something—anything—that he could kiss or lick or bite while Steve hung there, solidly inside him all the way to his heart, unmoving. “Please, Steve...”

“Hmm? Tell me...”

“*Move*,” Chandler ordered. Steve complied, dragging his hips back, then pushing forward again, gently at first, then harder, until he was balls-deep again and Chandler’s head fell back against the pillow and he begged, “Please, please, *please*.”

“*Chandler*,” Steve said thickly. “Whatever you need.”

“Please,” Chandler repeated, caught up in the rhythm, the deep thrust and retreat of Steve’s pistoning hips, the way his open mouth huffed half curses like *ffffff...uck* as he bit his lips, then ran his tongue across them.

At some point, Chandler simply wrapped an arm over one of Steve’s muscled shoulders and threaded the other under his opposite arm. He hung on, still saying *please*, still begging, as he gave up everything for a memory, for one magical moment in time.

“Ah, Steve.”

Steve nudged a hand between them to stroke Chandler off, supporting his weight with one arm while fumbling for the right touch with the other. “This okay?”

“Gods yes!” Chandler hung on some precipice for several impossible seconds,

his entire body resonating to Steve's perfect persuasion, then he hurtled into his release, spattering come all over his stomach and Steve's chest. He nearly shouted but Steve captured his cries with a passionate, claiming kiss, then followed him over the edge. Chandler absorbed Steve's moans and dotted kisses over any skin he could reach. Finally, firmly cupping Steve's face with his hands, he brought his head close and pressed a single kiss to each of Steve's closed eyes. They lay there entwined, listening to the sound of their breathing.

"I need to go back to my room."

Steve inched his dick carefully out of Chandler and discarded the used condom in a trash bin next to the bed. He wound both arms around him and pulled him close. "Few minutes," he mumbled.

"Ten." Chandler glanced at the clock, then closed his eyes again. He rested with his head on Steve's shoulder, wrapped up in the scent of sweat and recent sex, his body still tingling all over.

When ten minutes passed, he sighed. "I'll have to shower off before I can go back."

"I'll keep an ear out for Miss Poppy while you're in there."

"Thanks." Chandler got up and picked his sleep pants and jock from the floor where Steve had tossed them. He leaned over and kissed Steve again, this time on the forehead.

Tomorrow would be the first day, his heart told him, of a future spent comparing every man he would ever meet to Steve Adams.

Chapter Ten

The morning of Christmas Eve dawned blustery. High, fat clouds moved across the sky like stop-motion photography. It wasn't easy weather for the commercially obsessed at Christmas. It required re-anchoring and sandbagging some of the decorations so they stayed put; high winds would inevitably bring breakage no matter what they did to avoid it.

They went early and purchased a real Christmas tree, a too-fat Douglas fir that perfumed the house magnificently. Steve left the decorating of that to Chandler and Poppy, watching helplessly as they picked and chose from among his decorations. It would require more sorting at takedown than ever, but the smiles on their faces, especially Poppy's serious, often sad one, made his heart glad.

He didn't doubt that she was going to need counseling. She had only a vague idea of what had happened to her, and she didn't ask where her parents were. He wondered if she understood that they'd be gone forever, whether the concept of *forever* was there in that small head of hers yet.

Somewhere in there, behind her fathomless blue eyes, she carried the memory of the night they died. Of being the only survivor in a wreck that had left her hanging upside down, from what Chandler told him, in her car seat waiting for help to arrive while her parents lay dead in the front.

Jeez.

Chandler, for reasons of his own, shut down any conversation that didn't have to do with Christmas or decorating or food. He came back from answering the door, bearing a nicely wrapped platter of cut-up vegetables "Okay, Alice just dropped off a terrific *crudités* deal. Why do you suppose she did that?"

Steve took the tray from him and started to unwrap it. "Because I told her that we'd prefer to spend the afternoon here fixing up our tree than go and do the big family Christmas Eve dinner. Was I wrong?"

"No. Heavens, no. A little quiet is exactly what we need right now."

“Miss Poppy, you should try some of this and see if you like it.” Steve offered her a carrot stick of her own, along with some hummus dip and a little yellow round of light cheese. He showed her how to pull the tab to open it. “You don’t eat that part, that’s wax.”

Chandler grinned at her when she frowned. “It looks better than the cheese part, though, doesn’t it, Poptart?”

Over the course of the afternoon, Chandler seemed to slip further and further away from Steve, as if he had to break things off in preparation for the trip back out to the desert where he would pick up his car and, presumably, carry on with his life. Yet Steve kept catching a haunted look in Chandler’s eyes when he didn’t think he was being observed. Like something was breaking his heart.

Steve had surreptitiously turned on the television and inserted his favorite old-fashioned Christmas videotape, Berkeley Breathed’s *A Wish For Wings That Work*.

Poppy was enthralled with Opus and Bill, and Steve took the opportunity to lead Chandler into the kitchen. “Chandler?”

Chandler busied himself by fussing over the veggie tray. “Yes?” If he’d looked around, he’d have seen Steve coming up behind him before kissing his neck and rubbing his lips over the peach-fuzz hair at his nape. “*Oh...stop.*”

Steve pulled back a little. “What’s wrong with a little harmless nuzzling?”

“Nothing. I just...I don’t want Poppy to come in here and see us like this.”

“How come?”

“She doesn’t need to see me kissing guys.”

Well...that was... “Because they’re guys?”

“No. Because my private life is private.”

“You don’t want her to know you kiss guys?”

“No. It’s not that. What if she goes around saying I saw Uncle Chandler kissing Santa Claus?”

Steve didn’t plan on making this easy. “You don’t want her to tell people you were kissing Santa?”

“You *know* what I mean, think what people would say to her.”

“I still don’t follow. They’d say what, exactly? That there’s a song like that?” Steve sang,

“I saw Uncle kissing Santa Claus, underneath the mistletoe last night—”

“I don’t know why you’re pretending you don’t understand. What if she goes to school and tells her teachers ‘my uncle kisses guys’?”

“Guys plural?”

“It could be guys plural.”

“So you don’t want people to think you’re a slut?”

“That’s not what I mean. Why are you being so obtuse?”

“Are you in the closet?” Steve frowned at this. Nothing about Chandler said closet. Usually he didn’t fall for guys who weren’t out and proud. They hadn’t talked about it, though...

“Hell no, I’m not in the closet. I just don’t want whatever I do to color how people treat Poppy, okay? I don’t want whatever they think about me to affect her. I don’t want anyone to act like...” Chandler’s voice broke.

“Like she has an uncle who loves her?” Steve asked, turning Chandler and wrapping his arms around him. “A man she twists around her little finger? Who has her back, loves her unconditionally, worries about her constantly and oh, by the way, sneaks a kiss from his man every now and again?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It can be. It can be dead simple, Chandler. Did you never see your mom and dad sneak a kiss?”

“Of course I did. They still do that...”

“Then there’s no problem, it’s not like you come from Shakers or something.”

“Hardly,” Chandler snapped. “But my dad doesn’t get beard burn.”

“Is that as important as Poppy seeing her uncle is happy? That he’s an adult who has healthy relationships? That he respects his partners and they respect him?”

“But—”

“You’re no one she needs to be ashamed of, Chandler.”

Chandler’s chin dropped. “I never—”

“Didn’t you?”

Chandler had a way of looking at him that was one part *I’ve never seen anything this bizarre before* and one part last scoop of ice cream on a really hot day. It melted Steve’s insides and irritated him at the same time. It was quite possibly...hopefully—if Steve didn’t know better—love.

He should know better, damn it, than to get his hopes up that Chandler felt more than the temporary and very appropriate gratitude one would have for a man who helped him out of a breakdown on the highway.

Chandler was what, late twenties? Gen Y or some sort of nonsense like that while Steve was...well. He was as old as his damned car, which Chandler referred to as *vintage* and *classic*.

No way could Chandler be falling for him. Guys like Chandler didn’t fall for older guys who didn’t have money, who didn’t have power or prestige or anything to recommend them besides the fact that they liked to dress up as Santa Claus. That wasn’t in the handbook, which said at his age he was supposed to just disappear, to live in genteel poverty like Miss Marple and develop a

fondness for cats.

And Chandler was looking at him like...

“Look. I think you’re about to make a huge mistake. You shouldn’t give up on Poppy.”

“Of course I’m not giving up on her, I just can’t give her what she needs. My parents can do a much better job than I ever will, and I’ll still be there for her. I’ll still do whatever I can to—”

“*You* can give her everything she needs, Chandler. What if someone gave you what *you* need? What if you didn’t have to feel like you were alone anymore? What if—”

Before he could finish what he was trying to say, the doorbell rang. Chandler appeared gratified to have a reason to end the conversation, given the way he was already halfway to the door to answer it and it wasn’t even his damn house.

Chandler opened the door to Steve’s sister Kelly and her daughter Meghan, who invited Poppy to come and eat lunch at their house down the street. Apparently they were going to make her a Christmas stocking, which they said would involve glue and glitter, and they wanted to keep her for the big family dinner at Steve’s mom and dad’s, which always ended with midnight Mass. Chandler shot him a frown that told him he knew the plan was entirely contrived.

Steve leaned in and spoke to him quietly. “There isn’t a pool, they don’t keep guns in the house, there will be some light drinking but Meghan will be watching Poppy and some of the other littler kids. As much as you can trust anyone, you can trust her. She babysits all the time; she’s already made enough money to cover her first year of college.”

“I’ll pay you,” Chandler told Meghan. “What’s your going rate?”

“It’s covered.” Kelly grinned and dropped her gaze to his...whoa. “Merry Christmas, Santa, don’t get stuck in the chimney. Unless, you know...it’s consensual.”

That flew over the girls' heads but Chandler flushed a dull red.

"If you're doing crafts, I should pack a change of clothes or two for her..."

Meghan took Poppy's hand and asked her where she kept her stuff. They took off for the guest bedroom.

"We'll take good care of her. Don't worry." Kelly assured Chandler. "We haven't lost one yet."

Steve glared at her. "Stop helping, Kelly."

They waited in what seemed like an endless, awkward silence until the girls came back with Poppy's duffel bag. "We just brought the whole thing, that way she can go to Mass with us."

"Is that okay?" Kelly asked. When Chandler nodded she asked Steve, "Will you come too? Mom will be disappointed if you don't go."

Steve nodded. "I'm going. We'll pick Poppy up and take her, just make sure she's dressed and ready..."

"Got it. *Roger, Roger.*" Kelly winked at him before they left to step down off the porch and onto the path leading to the street.

Steve waved. "You have clearance, Clarence."

Kelly glanced back at Steve and Chandler. "Wish I had a camera."

Steve shooed her off and closed the door behind her. He couldn't help sighing when he leaned against it. They were alone, and he had some things he needed to say...

"Who the *hell* is Clarence?"

Steve rolled his eyes. "Did you never see the movie *Airplane?*"

Chandler's brows rose. "*Airplane?* Sure I did."

Steve shook his head. "Never mind. It's not important." He was about to go

back to what he'd been saying before his sister interrupted, but Chandler put fingers over his lips to stop him from speaking.

"Gods." Chandler's eyes glittered. "*Gods*. Please, Steve. Don't let's waste a minute of the time we have to be together."

"But—"

"I don't want to talk. Please." Chandler brushed kisses down Steve's neck while he undid the buttons on his shirt. "I'll beg if I have to."

"Never." Steve smoothed his hands down to Chandler's ass where he gripped, hard, lifting when Chandler jumped and wrapped his lithe body around him. Steve carried him that way to the bedroom and set him gently down on the bed. "You never, ever, have to beg me for anything, Chandler."

Steve stripped off his button-down and opened his jeans while Chandler practically tore his T-shirt off over his head. Chandler toed off his shoes and shimmied out of his jeans, then pulled Steve to him by his hips.

Steve looked down at Chandler's upturned face. His eyes were closed and his mouth slightly open, as though he expected Steve to press his cock into it. Fingers tightened on Steve's hips. He brushed himself against Chandler's lips, his dick straining behind the fabric of his shorts.

"Mmm." Chandler turned his head this way and that, teasing Steve through thin cotton, dampening it with his warm, moist breath.

"*Boy*."

"I like when you call me that." Chandler's voice buzzed Steve's balls. "I like being your boy."

"Yeah?"

"I liked it when you fucked my mouth before."

Steve didn't have to be asked. He slipped his cock free of the light cotton fabric and nudged his dick against those pretty pink lips. "This what you want?"

“Yes,” Chandler hissed, then opened his mouth to take it.

Steve brushed Chandler’s mouth again, then pulled back, watching as Chandler’s pupils got large and dark.

“Does anyone have a key to your place?” Chandler asked as he reached for a condom from the nightstand drawer. He handed it to Steve, who tore it open and made short work of rolling it on his cock.

“Yeah, but I doubt they’d come in without knocking first.” Steve watched in disbelief as a flicker of what could only have been disappointment came over Chandler’s expressive face. “But yeah...lots of people have keys. Theoretically we could be interrupted at any time.”

“Oh no.” Apparently that wasn’t Chandler’s worst-case scenario, because he gripped Steve’s hips tighter and swallowed his cock. He buried his nose in Steve’s pubic hair then backed off, until Steve’s dick bobbed on the tip of his tongue. “I hope they don’t.”

Little liar.

Chandler had a way of winding his tongue around Steve’s cock that sent shivers up his spine. Steve clapped his hands on either side of Chandler’s head and snapped his hips forward. “Ah. *Shit, yeah.* Suck, boy.”

Chandler hollowed his cheeks and drew back, displaying prodigious breath control while Steve lost command of his hips.

“Stop me if you need to.”

In reply, Chandler gripped his hips tighter, tugging him deeper into that hot wet caress and pulling him closer to the edge. Steve’s knees tried to buckle but Chandler wrapped his arms around him, holding him steady...

Steve didn’t know how much longer he could go, but he wanted this, wanted to slip in and out of Chandler’s beautiful lips forever, to keep Chandler looking up at him like he hung the moon in the sky until he couldn’t take one more second.

Steve's balls tightened up and the deep magic of his release reverberated through his muscles and blood, making him clench and shudder as he came in Chandler's mouth.

Chandler held the condom as Steve softened, pulling back off Steve's dick. He lapped and nuzzled at Steve's balls, still gripping his hips tightly, as if he wanted to wring the last drop of pleasure from him. Steve groaned and caressed his head, smoothing his hair back and running his thumbs over Chandler's high cheekbones while he tried to memorize the way Chandler was looking at him right then.

When Chandler would have reached down and wrapped a hand around his dick to stroke off, Steve stopped him.

"Do you want me?"

"What do you mean?" Chandler blinked.

Steve felt his cheeks heat. He was nervous as hell. Maybe this was so hard because if being fucked was a rarity for him, he absolutely never, *ever* offered. It had been years since anyone had taken his ass. It was something he only did when he...well, if things were serious on his part. If he'd already given his heart, his ass didn't seem like such a big deal.

And, oh yeah. Newsflash. Even if *he* hadn't realized it yet, his body had.

I've already given my heart to Chandler.

"Do you want to fuck me?"

Chapter Eleven

Chandler gazed up at Steve. Did he *want* to fuck him? Was that...like *do you want a pain reliever that works?*

Duh.

“Yeah. I want to fuck you.” Because even if he liked being Steve’s boy, there was always going to be a part of him that wanted to be Steve’s *man*.

Steve bit his lip. From the faint wash of red staining his cheekbones, Chandler realized these might be uncharted, or at least rarely plied, waters.

“Do you really want it? Or are you just offering because you think you should?”

“I really, really want you.” Steve’s voice sounded hoarse, as if he’d been the one to give that blowjob and not Chandler. “But I think this is the first time I’ve ever offered—in my life.”

Chandler pulled Steve down to sit beside him. “I’m honored.”

Steve shrugged and looked away. Was he embarrassed?

“Don’t you like it?”

“Yeah, I like it. But I usually save it. When I feel someone inside me—” Steve’s lashes lowered, “—I need it to be more than just...casual.”

“What?”

“You heard me. It’s special. Intimate. I don’t go there unless there’s more.”

“I see.” Chandler wrapped his fingers together so Steve wouldn’t see them tremble.

“Could this be...?” Steve brushed a lock of Chandler’s hair behind his ear. “Is it possible that what I’m feeling could be mutual?”

“It’s only been two days.” Chandler swallowed. “Not even two.”

Steve lifted his shoulders and let them fall again. “That didn’t answer my question.”

“Steve...” Chandler expelled the breath he’d been holding. Steve didn’t avoid his eyes. His bright blue gaze was honest and unwavering. Chandler read everything Steve felt in his heart; he seemed willing to lay himself bare—both literally and figuratively—if that was what Chandler wanted.

“I’m not delusional or anything. I know I’m older. I know that I’m a working-class guy with some pretty weird hobbies.”

“You’re fucking Santa Claus.” Chandler gave Steve a playful shove.

“Hey. Don’t knock the Jolly Elf, man. And technically it’s you who’s—”

“You have the biggest heart, Steve. You give everything you have to anyone who needs you.”

“Are you saying that like it’s a bad thing?”

Steve might be stung by Chandler’s words but if he didn’t say them now... “It’s a great thing, but this isn’t like some movie, where Santa meets an unhappy little orphan girl and solves all her problems.”

“Is *that* what you think this is?”

“Your heart is in the right place. But you can’t help Poppy by creating an artificial family for her.”

Steve remained silent.

“I know you want to help. I admire you for it. Really.”

“But?”

“Poppy has a family. They’ll take good care of her.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?” Chandler asked. “I’m fine. I know I’m doing the right thing for her, the thing that’s best.”

“But what do *you* need?”

“I don’t understand...”

“You talk like I’m some kind of do-gooder who saw Poppy and immediately decided that she needed my love, and you’re only about half right—this isn’t about Poppy. What’s between you and me is about *us*. It’s about me seeing a guy who’s basically decent, who’s trying to pitch in for a kid after a tragedy, who’s filled with grief and fear and—maybe—needs something I have to give.”

Chandler drew in a breath. “Well. I don’t really need—”

“You know very well it’s more than that now. You’re hot and smart and really, really good in bed. Just the way you look at me blows my mind. I like knowing that when I turn around you’ll be standing there, ready to laugh at my stupid jokes, ready to smile in that secret way you have. That makes me happy. And you seem to want me as much as I want you... Don’t make me explain it. If you don’t feel it, then...”

“I feel it.” Chandler couldn’t help it; that much was true. “But it isn’t that simple.”

“I think it might be,” Steve said. “I want to be the guy, Chandler. I’ve had a tough year and I don’t beat around the bush anymore.”

“I guess not.”

“I want to be *your* guy.”

Chandler thought that through. “What about Poppy?”

“Don’t get me wrong, Poppy is great. I really like her.”

“Me too.”

“I’d love to be part of her family. I’d jump on that and feel lucky to have the chance.”

“I think you already *are* part of her family.” Chandler inched his hand over and captured Steve’s. “She likes you a lot.”

Steve smiled at that. “But I’m asking you...just *you*. Do you want me?”

“Hell yes, I want you.” Chandler tilted his head so he could fit his mouth to Steve’s. They shared a languid kiss, their breaths mingling while they took their time lighting a fire, a slow burn that began in Chandler’s heart. When Steve put his hand on Chandler’s hard cock through his jock, sensation rippled over him in a shockwave of pure pleasure...

“*Gods*. You feel so fucking good.”

Steve’s eyelashes tickled Chandler’s cheek. “Then come here and fill me up.”

* * *

If Steve gave any thought at all to being older, to being just a little gray, a little less flexible, and maybe a little uncertain about taking a man’s cock after years of being in the driver’s seat, Chandler put him perfectly, gloriously at ease. Chandler took the time to arouse him to an almost ecstasy of anticipation, skimming his body with soft hands, plucking and nibbling at his nipples. Marking the skin of his abs on the way down his treasure trail.

Chandler’s body slid over his—all crisp hair and sweat and arousal. Hot breath puffed over Steve’s skin while the rasp of his unshaven face teased between Steve’s legs. Wherever Chandler roamed he left sensitized nerve endings and chaotic longing until every molecule of Steve’s body was waiting, eager for more.

Steve’s cock throbbed in Chandler’s hand, but he merely held it out of the way, kissing every inch of skin around it.

“Chandler.” Steve jumped when Chandler cupped his balls. “Are you testing me or something?”

“No way.” Steve circled and tapped Steve’s hole with a dry finger, smoothing

the delicate skin. “Lube?”

“Definitely.” Steve leaned over and pulled lube and condoms from the bedside table.

Chandler held his hand out. “Can you?”

“Sure.” Steve opened the bottle and poured some of the slick liquid onto Chandler’s fingers. After that he relaxed his legs and let Chandler have him.

Chandler’s touch was featherlight at first. Gentle and careful, he slipped a finger inside easily, then added another to stretch him and—Steve was sure—to remind him why he wanted this so much. A third finger curved and swept over Steve’s sweet spot, electric and stunning, just right. Those fingers began pumping in and out of him while he watched Chandler—engrossed, concentrating, his mouth slack with passion, his eyes gone darker, a flush staining his cheeks and chest.

He brushed over Steve’s prostate again, and soon Steve was arching for him, meeting his fingers as they pushed inside him, and he wondered how long it would be before he could feel Chandler’s dick in their place. He picked up a condom, not necessarily to hurry things along, but Chandler’s fingers stilled, deliberately stroked his prostate and then pulled out.

Chandler knelt and Steve rolled the condom down his rigid length. He’d shown remarkable restraint but now his limbs were shaking with the force of his need.

For Steve, there was nothing like the moment before being fucked. He got chills when he watched Chandler pump his dick with his lubed hand a couple of times in preparation. A modicum of fear only heightened his pleasure. He gazed up at Chandler’s face—at his sweet smile and honest eyes—and found everything he needed *right there*.

“Yes,” Steve hissed and clasped Chandler’s hand, linking their fingers together. “Go.”

“Going to make you feel good.” Chandler poised his cock at Steve’s entrance and pushed in. “Going to make you soar.”

Steve took a kiss as Chandler buried his cock. It burned—*hell yes*, it burned—but it was bearable, it throbbed and felt like fire until Steve felt the slap of Chandler’s balls against his butt.

* * *

“So fucking tight.” Chandler groaned, trying to wait until Steve grew accustomed to the stretch, holding on to his control by millimeters. “Gods, Steve, I just wanna...”

“Move, boy,” Steve growled. “Take me the way you want me.”

Chandler rocked his hips back, then surged forward while he tried to get some traction with his feet. Steve’s legs tangled with his and he’d been right, all that crisp hair struck little sensations—sparklike and electric, as their legs slid against one another.

“*Gods.*” Chandler shuddered all over. Steve felt like magic, like fucking a giant, he was so long and built and—wow, *right then*, when it was entirely too late, he wondered how it might have been to bend Steve over the kitchen table or the bathroom sink, or maybe even the seat of a motorcycle, and fuck the living hell out of him from behind.

He plunged his cock into Steve’s willing body over and over, watching his face carefully for cues. Was he all right? Did it burn? Was there enough lube? Did he need more friction? Cues.

Clues.

Of which there were none.

Absolutely none at all.

“All right?”

“Uhn,” Steve grunted, then tipped his head back and drew in some short, panting breaths.

Chandler asked again, even as he gripped Steve’s ass in one hand and snapped

his hips so hard that for a minute he saw stars... “You okay?”

“Uhn...” Steve hips met his with every stroke, arch and thrust. Until their skin slapped together like thunder, like the final lap at Indy *and the crowd goes wild*.

That big strong body took him to a place he’d never been before and he liked it. He got lost, climbed, rose and fell. It allowed him the freedom to go as hard as he wanted, and all that strength, all that muscle and sinew and bone, *pushed back*. Chandler found he liked it that way.

Gods, he liked it a whole hell of a lot.

Chandler got a brief grip on his sanity. “Tell me you’re okay or I will fucking. Kill. You. Steve.” He used his cock to punctuate that without thinking, deep, hard thrusts that made Steve groan...

“I...” Steve’s eyes rolled back in his head.

“What?” Chandler inched his way forward again, angling to either hit Steve’s sweet spot or pierce his heart like an hors d’oeuvre. “*What?*”

“*Oh.*” Steve’s head fell back and his cock spattered, sticky and hot, between them.

In the aftermath of that, Chandler drove into that tightly clenching heat, short, sharp strokes that lasted forever—and were over way too soon—when he hurled into his own release.

It took a while for him to catch his breath. By that time he’d carefully pulled himself out of Steve’s ass and discarded the used condom. He and Steve both lay on their backs, staring up at the ceiling. Chandler’s mouth was dry and his cock felt like he’d gotten it caught an old-fashioned clothes wringer.

But in a very, very good way.

“Are you okay?” he managed, finally, when his heart rate evened out.

“Sure.” Steve turned toward him, pillowing his head on his arm. “Didn’t that seem okay?”

Understatement of the year.

“Yeah. Of course. Awesome. But I asked if *you* were all right.”

“Chandler.”

“Hmm?”

“I guess I don’t talk much when I have a cock up my ass. But I think I’d tell you if you hurt me.”

Steve reached for his hand while he digested this. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Steve said firmly, drawing Chandler into his arms. “Best ever, boy. You rock my fucking world.”

After a while, Chandler whispered. “I want to stay here with you.”

He felt Steve smile against his skin. “Me too. Now what?”

“I don’t know,” Chandler admitted. “I just...don’t know.”

Chapter Twelve

Steve lay awake long after the sun set, patting a sleeping Chandler in one hand and holding his Zippo lighter in the other. He'd watched through the window when the Christmas lights, which were hooked up to a timer, went on at dusk. He'd run away—from his family, from his friends, from Christmas—yet there he was, smack in the middle of another Adam's Family Holiday anyway.

Life was such an unpredictable damned thing. If he'd left five minutes earlier, had one or two fewer cups of coffee, driven past that rest stop, ignored the open hood of Chandler's car, none of this would have happened.

It had to mean something that it *had* happened, right? It had to mean something that when he'd seen Chandler, he'd stopped to help him rather than ignore his plight and drive off, assuming he had an auto-club card.

He thumbed the lid of his Zippo so it clicked open and shut in his hand. Apparently Poppy came from a family of deep sleepers, because Chandler didn't stir. Steve had been thinking—when he wasn't simply lost in stroking his hand over Chandler's sleeping body—about what it would take to make it work between them. About what he'd be willing to give up, about what Chandler might consider sacrificing so they could be together. That's when he realized he didn't know much about Chandler at all. He had a moment's pause when it occurred to him that he didn't even know what Chandler did for a living.

Steve brushed his thumb over Chandler's soft lips, causing him to smile in his sleep. He figured he could rule out fixing cars and making pancakes.

Chandler had said something about having built a life he liked and not wanting to change it for Poppy. Was that true? Or was that fear talking? Because from what Steve could tell, *a lot* of what was driving Chandler was fear. Did he like his job? Was he a member of a tight-knit group of friends? Would he consider a long-distance relationship? Would he consider relocating or would he expect Steve to do that? Would he nix the idea entirely?

On the other hand, Steve knew he was pretty set in his ways. His business

depended on the goodwill and word-of-mouth advertising of his clients. And they weren't likely to pass his number along to strangers in Poway. Plus, his family was crazy but they were his. Where else could he live and have that? Where else could he be there for them at a moment's notice, as they were there for him?

That always seemed like a good thing, but now he wasn't so sure. It had to be daunting for Chandler, who probably figured that he'd end up with a nice guy, quiet evenings, kids later, if ever. That was what he'd imagined at his age.

And there was the age thing too...

Steve pulled his arm out from beneath Chandler's head and slid from the bed. He followed up a quick trip to the bathroom with a foray to the kitchen for food. His family was probably still engaged in the annual Christmas Bacchanalia, and he hoped that Poppy was having a good time. He didn't know if sidetracking her with a huge diversion was appropriate, but he had enjoyed seeing her smiles and hearing the sound of her laughter.

Steve found a cup of vanilla yogurt in his refrigerator and topped it with a handful of lowfat granola. He'd just sat down on a stool in the counter when he heard Chandler's voice behind him.

"It got cold and I woke up."

"I'm sorry, I should have covered you better." Wordlessly, he offered his yogurt to Chandler.

Chandler shook his head. He stood behind Steve and wrapped his arms around him. "I think I missed your skin."

"I can bring it back to bed if you like."

Chandler flopped his head down to rest his cheek against Steve's back. "This is crazy, isn't it? Meeting you like that, falling for you, wanting to be near you as much as I do. That's not normal, is it?"

"Christmas does seem to put things on hyperdrive. Maybe you won't feel this way next week. Tomorrow even."

“What about you?”

“I’m pretty used to trusting my gut.”

“And what does your gut say?”

Steve put his food down and swiveled around on the stool until he faced Chandler, who stepped between his knees and pressed in for a hug. “It says trust yourself to do what’s right. Trust your instinct.”

“Platitudes?” Chandler’s lower lip pushed out in a delightfully childlike pout. “I didn’t expect—”

“No, listen. I met you and I didn’t expect to fall for you but clearly—” Steve swallowed,

“—very clearly I have. So now I have to say what’s on my mind. I have to take the chance you feel the same way. There’s this clock in my head now—*ticktock ticktock*—that tells me not to squander my time. Not to waste one second that I can be spending loving the people I—”

Chandler cupped his face and kissed him, a thoroughly deep, delightful, heady kiss that seemed to go on and on until finally he broke away because he had to breathe. “Me too. You know? I waved goodbye to my brother and his wife when they pulled out of my parents’ driveway. Just...bye. I never dreamed there would be so much I’d want to say. If I’d known it was the last time...”

“This is crazy. I don’t even know you, man. What do you do for a living?”

“Me? I sell advertising in a local newspaper.”

“Really? You’re a salesman?”

“Yeah.”

“So...conceivably, you could sell...I don’t know. Anything?” Steve’s heart beat fast. “I mean, you could get a job selling things anywhere, right?”

“I guess so. It’s a pretty tough economy. I doubt I could sell something people

didn't need."

"And what about where you live. You said you have an apartment? Are you planning to live in your brother's house?"

At this Chandler shut down. Steve saw how painful the subject was for him. "I don't even want to *visit* my brother's house. I'll have to go there eventually. Poppy needs her clothes and toys. I'll have to pack and store all her parents' things for when she's older, but I don't want to live there, no."

"I could help you with all of that, my business is slow this time of year. I could help you find your balance, and then maybe once you know where you stand, you'd consider dating me?"

"What about Poppy?"

"What about her? Shouldn't you give yourself a chance with Poppy? You can't run from responsibility you know is yours. I'm not telling you anything you don't know."

"You've got it all figured out?"

Steve wondered if Chandler even realized he was brushing his lips back and forth over the bristly skin of his neck. This was the most relaxed Steve had ever seen him. "Not a bit of it."

"I want to be with you, like this. That's what I want."

"Yeah?"

"But if I try to have it all, if I want to date, to work, have a life *and* take care of Poppy—"

"You wouldn't be the only single dad out there. You wouldn't even be the only single gay dad. We'll take it real slow, Chandler. One thing at a time, see how we feel..."

"But if I tell people I've just met you and I want to see where this leads, they'll think I'm crazy. People will call me irresponsible and say that I'm not doing

what's best for Poppy."

"You worry a lot about what people will say. Is anyone planning to fight you for custody?"

"No. There's no one else except me and my folks. My sister, but she wouldn't fight me. Poppy's mother's family—what's left of it—is in France. Her parents are dead, she was an only child and she wasn't close with anyone else there. She liked us. She said it was the first time she'd had family in a long time."

"Then why worry about what others will say?" Steve held up his hand so Chandler wouldn't interrupt. "I'm not just saying this because I want you. You need to be sure about where you stand. But raising a kid doesn't mean you can't have relationships. It requires more careful screening, sure, but—"

Chandler bumped him with his shoulder. "I could hardly do better than Santa Claus."

At this, Steve laughed. "You have no idea how many people think I'm a total perv for liking that so much."

"People have filthy minds."

"They do indeed." Steve sobered. He'd certainly seen that side of people over the years.

"There will always be people who think the worst."

"I know." Chandler sat on the stool next to Steve's. "I get what you're saying."

"I guess my point is, where is your heart? What does it tell you? Poppy needs you. Your brother and sister-in-law trusted you."

Tears sparkled on Chandler's lashes. "What if I'm not good enough? What if I fuck up?"

Steve sighed. "I wish my mom was here. She is so much better at this. We'll talk to her later, all right? But right now let me tell you that she'd say you *will* fuck up..."

“Huh?”

“She’d say it’s a foregone conclusion that at some point you will really make some dreadful parenting mistakes. She talked about shit like that when Dave got his girlfriend pregnant, and she’s said something along those lines to every one of them since.”

“That’s...not exactly a ringing endorsement for parenthood.”

“No.” Steve got up and got two beers from the fridge. “But as you can see, it hasn’t kept our family from growing at an almost alarming rate.”

“No sir, it hasn’t done that. Let me.” Chandler got up and took the beers, opening them with Steve’s wall-mounted opener.

“Little things amuse him so.” Steve rolled his eyes.

Chandler grabbed hold of Steve’s ass. “And big things.”

“Hey, that’s my ass you’re calling big.”

“Nuh-uh, I wasn’t. You’re my new *big thing*.” He took a swig of his beer. “Look at you, so tall...”

Steve wrapped his arms around Chandler. “Like that, do you?”

“I like everything about you.”

“Me too.” Steve reddened. “About you, I mean.”

“Good thing that car broke down,” Chandler barely whispered. “I think you might have saved me from more than just a night in the auto repair shop, Steve.”

The way Chandler looked at Steve made him breathless. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah.”

“You think we could make it work?”

“I’ll have to consult my gut, Steve.” Chandler took another sip of his beer and gave it some thought, during which Steve waited in an agony of uncertainty. “My gut says hell yes.”

Steve’s heart slammed against his rib cage. Chandler smiled his secret smile and Steve’s cock responded accordingly. “And what does your gut say about me, personally?”

Chandler smiled. “The same thing it said about your car when I first saw it. Get in, shut up and hang on. You’re in for the ride of your life.”

Epilogue

One Year Later

Chandler tried to look discreet as he sauntered away from the laundry room and back toward the main party. He hoped Steve would wait a few minutes before he came out. There was no point in everyone knowing what they'd been doing. He turned the corner and bumped into Steve's brother Dave, whose first words confirmed his deepest fears.

"I know what you've been up to."

Chandler rolled his eyes.

"Seriously, dude. Newlyweds. Enjoy it while you can."

Dave's wife joined them, and they seemed to be waiting for Steve to come out.

"Good laundry weather," she finally said, all innocence.

They busted a gut laughing when Steve came out of the laundry room with a stack of towels, attempting to look as though he'd had a purpose for being in there.

"Very funny." Steve put the towels down and took Chandler's hand. "We'll be with the grownups, if you want us."

Chandler followed him back into the living room where the eldest Adams and his wife held court. The rest of the family swirled around them in a kaleidoscope of holiday colors, everyone dressed their best for Mass, after which there would be dessert and one present, a family tradition, then the kids would try to sleep through their excitement over Santa's impending arrival.

"Suckers," Chandler whispered into Steve's ear. "I make Santa come for me all year round..." He felt a tug on his jacket and turned.

"So. You have matching ties." Steve's mother straightened Chandler's tie and gave his lapels a little brush with her hands.

Chandler kissed her cheek. “They go with Poppy’s dress.”

“I saw that.” She shot him her mom smile. His mom had one just like it. It said *you did well. I love you. You make me happy*. He let her pick up his hand. “And these.”

Chandler grinned when he looked at his ring. He and Steve had exchanged rings around Thanksgiving, and it had apparently not gone unnoticed. “Yeah.”

“Are you going to have a commitment ceremony?”

Steve saved him from having to answer that. “Nah. It’s not about ceremonies. We know what we are.”

Chandler admitted the truth. “I just got tired of all the poachers going after my Santa. No wonder the real Mrs. Claus keeps her guy so fat.”

“Well, if you change your mind, don’t worry about naysayers. I would love to see you two have a wedding, and fuck the assholes.”

Chandler’s mind was drawing him a perfect mental picture of her words.

Steve’s mom frowned a little. “That sounded a lot better in my head.”

Poppy called his name and he glanced around. He located her by the fireplace mantle. She waved to him. So pretty, still like a doll, but maybe this year she wasn’t so solemn. “Uncle Chandler, come and see, they found my stocking from last year and we’re hanging it up.”

“Just a sec, Poptart.” He turned back to Steve’s mother. “Hold that thought. I need to go check this out.”

He made his way through the crowd. Apparently, all the kids hung a stocking at Grandma and Grandpa’s place as well as the ones they had in their own homes. Chandler’s mother had done a lovely needlepoint stocking. It had been hanging in pride of place at Steve and Chandler’s house since Thanksgiving. The same night they’d hung it up, they’d exchanged rings and decided to go through the formal process of adopting Poppy—both of them—cementing their family together legally and with an eye toward forever.

He took in the fuzzy red-and-white stocking Poppy held now, her name clumsily written on it in glitter glue. There were plastic rhinestones stuck all over it and as she hung it up on a hook in the mantle, one fell off.

They'd begun their family when she made that—an entire year had passed since then, he could hardly believe it. His gaze roamed the room until it landed on Steve, the man who'd given him all this and so much more.

“Thank you,” he mouthed.

Steve nodded toward him, then mouthed back, ““Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night.””

About the Author

Z.A. Maxfield started writing in 2007 on a dare from her children and never looked back. Pathologically disorganized, and perennially optimistic, she writes as much as she can, reads as much as she dares, and enjoys her time with family and friends. If anyone asks her how a wife and mother of four manages to find time for a writing career, she'll answer, "It's amazing what you can accomplish if you give up housework."

Her published books include *Crossing Borders*, Epic Award finalist *St. Nacho's*, *Drawn Together*, *Physical Therapy*, *Blue Fire*, *Fugitive Color* and *Jacob's Ladder*, from Loose Id; *The Long Way Home*, from Aspen Mountain Press; *ePistols at Dawn*, from Samhain Publishing; and *Notturmo*, *Stirring Up Trouble* and *Vigil*, from MLR Press. Readers can visit her website at <http://www.zamaxfield.com>.



Icecapade

By Josh Lanyon

On the eve of the new millennium, diamond thief Noel Snow seduced FBI special agent Robert Cuffe, then fled into the dawn. Now a successful novelist, Noel uses his capers as fodder for his books, and has modeled his hero's nemesis (and potential love interest) on Cuffe. Though he leaves Robert a drunken phone message every New Year's Eve, Noel hasn't seen or heard from him in a decade.

So he's thrilled when his former lover shows up at his upstate farm one Christmas Eve. Elation quickly turns to alarm when Robert accuses Noel of being responsible for a recent rash of diamond heists. Robert is all business and as cold as ice: it seems his only interest in Noel is to put him behind bars.

Innocent of the crimes, and still as attracted as ever to the oh-so-serious lawman, Noel plans a second seduction—providing he can stay out of jail long enough!

Prologue

January 1st, 2000

The world did not end.

Given his hangover, maybe it should have. Noel stared up at the tiny red eye of the hotel room smoke detector. A little late for red lights, considering the warm weight lying against him, the muscular hairy leg tangled with his own, the big hand resting possessively on his groin.

Talk about having him by the balls.

He smiled faintly, turned his head on the fine linen pillowcase to study his bedmate. Tumbled black curls, a strong nose, a thin, ironic mouth. Not a handsome face, exactly, but undeniably attractive in a craggy, tough guy way.

So this was FBI Special Agent Robert Cuffe.

Noel's lips twitched with self-mockery. Well, that answered one question.

He resisted the temptation to touch his mouth to the surprisingly soft lips a few inches from his own. As dearly as he'd love to wake Cuffe up for another round of fun and games, play time was over. He could see the watery frame of light around the top of the long ivory draperies. It must be five-thirty or so. Longer than he'd intended to stay.

Cuffe muttered in his sleep, a gust of alcohol-scented breath warming Noel's ear. Noel's mouth curved again. Cuffe was a big guy and he could hold his drink all right, but Noel knew a trick or two to even the odds. Even so, there was no pretending he too hadn't been drunk off his ass last night. To take that kind of a chance?

Definitely the worse for drink.

But it had been worth it.

From his standpoint anyway. Cuffe might feel differently once he figured out who had actually been seducing whom. Not much of a sense of humor, Special Agent Cuffe. Took himself and his mission very seriously. And his mission last night had been to try and get the goods on diamond thief Noel Snow.

And he'd been close. Not as close as he thought, but close enough. Closer than anyone else had come in the three years Noel had been in business. In fact, Noel had begun to take a friendly interest in Cuffe—even before last night.

He stretched cautiously, respectful of his aching head and the tiny, mostly pleasurable pangs of a body well used. Cuffe's hand flexed in a responsive, an unconscious caress, and Noel's cock came instantly awake. He mentally shook his head. at himself.

But God, it *had* been good. What he wouldn't give to lie curled against Cuffe's long, strong body for a couple more hours. When Cuffe woke they could have a nice leisurely fuck, shower together, perhaps order room service. The Michelangelo had the best coffee and hot croissants outside of Paris.

But no. Cuffe would probably resemble a bear with a hangover. He was too smart not to start questioning his good luck the night before, and before long he'd put two and two together and Noel would be in bracelets—the stainless steel kind. After that, it would only be a matter of time before Cuffe figured out exactly where Dahlia Boaz's 33-carat diamond ring had been stashed.

Speaking of which, Noel needed to get downstairs before the cleaning crew got rolling.

He threw his bedmate a final cautious look. Cuffe continued to sleep the sleep of the just. The just fucked. His face was hard even in his dreams, softened only by ridiculous eyelashes—as thick and dark as a doll's.

Keeping his breaths even and slow, his movements minimal, Noel inched out from beneath Cuffe's arm and slid to the edge of the bed. He rose, careful not to bounce the mattress, and stood for a moment watching Cuffe in the gloom.

Was he faking?

No.

Not much for subterfuge, Cuffe, regardless of what he believed. For nearly two years they'd been playing cat and mouse, and all this time Cuffe had imagined *he* was the cat. Noel had become quite fond of his endearingly single-minded nemesis. He always made sure to leave a few promising clues for him, enough to guarantee Cuffe remained point man on his case.

Of course after last night...well, Noel had his own problems to deal with after last night.

It took him less than three minutes to pack his remaining belongings. He never really *unpacked*. He'd enjoyed watching Cuffe painstakingly—considering how smashed he was—rifle through his suitcase last night while Noel feigned sleep.

Easing open the hotel door, he hung out the Do Not Disturb sign, slipped into the hall and soundlessly closed the door behind him.

At this time of the morning it only took a couple of seconds to catch an elevator to the main lobby, chill and pristine as a marble tomb following the revelries of the night before. A hint of antiseptic hung in the air. Noel could hear the distant howl of a vacuum. Through artful arrangements of creamy orchids and gilt Italian vases he spotted household staff going about their duties.

There was no sign of surveillance. No sign that anyone was paying him any attention at all. Why would they? Everyone in the city was probably recovering from the night before and the blow out New Year's Eve party in Times Square.

Noel checked out without incident, and headed straight to the downstairs lavatory. Using the small, universal key on his fob, he opened the door of the metal trash container, moved the basket out of the way, and retrieved the plastic wrapped ring he had left tucked in the back of the metal compartment. He unzipped the lining of his London Fog trench coat, dropped the ring in and rezippped.

There was no real reason for the sick thud of his heart, the uncharacteristic tremor in his hands. He felt as nervous as when he'd pulled his first job. Why? It was going like clockwork. Hangover. That's all this was. He needed a couple of Alka-Seltzer and sleep. He could have both on the flight to Amsterdam.

A moment later he pushed out of the restroom, strolled through the main lobby and walked out through the entrance of The Michelangelo.

Yellow dawn cast baked watercolor light across the tall buildings and shady streets. No planes fell from the sky. The computers of the world had not ground to a halt. The traffic signals continued to blink their messages to the eerily quiet streets.

Noel raised his arm to flag down a cab, and moments later one pulled to the curb, exhaust warming the cold air. From behind smudgy windows, he could hear the muffled blast of Simon and Garfunkel's "The Only Living Boy in New York."

He drew a deep breath of cold, dry air scented of exhaust and the salt and chemicals they used to keep the streets ice free—and something uncannily like...expensive urine. The Manhattan cocktail. There was no place on earth that smelled like New York City.

Noel tossed his bags in the cab. No one tried to stop him. No one noticed him at all. It was the first day of the New Year. The first day of the new Millennium.

A new beginning.

So why did it feel like something was ending?

Chapter One

Two days before Christmas—present day

“That went better than I expected.” Elise Bennett locked the doors of Odyssey Books as the final customer departed into the sleety December night. She glanced back at Noel. “You’re not serious about winding up the Nash Blue series are you?”

Elise was a pretty, forty-something brunette, the former marketing director of a large publishing house. She’d opened her own bookstore and made it a success at a time when indie bookstores everywhere were folding, which said something for both her acumen and her drive.

Noel shrugged into his black cashmere coat. “I think it’s time, don’t you? I’ve had a good run. Eight books.” Seven books more than he’d ever expected to write—let alone sell.

“I might have agreed with you earlier this evening, but after listening to your fans...although I still don’t know what the ultimate fallout will be from making Nash Blue gay.”

“He was always gay. I finally brought him out of the closet.”

“If Nash was always gay, what the heck was he doing bedding all those beautiful women all these years?” Elise pulled down the shades across the double doors and moved to turn off the Christmas lights in the large picture windows.

It was a lovely shop. Gleaming hardwood floors, low and easily accessible shelves that looked like real bookcases, colorful, old time framed posters. It looked like Noel had wanted all bookstores to look when he was a kid. A kid from a family where only *goluboj*—faggots—read books for fun.

“He bedded a few beautiful men too.”

“Yes, but we all believed that was something he had to do to stay alive.”

Noel laughed. “Isn’t that the point of all sex?”

Norma, Elise’s assistant, looked up from counting the register. “Let me try to wrap my brain around this. Nash Blue turns out to be gay and in love with his plodding police nemesis Detective Richard Cross, and you’re going to *leave* it there?”

“Where do you think it should end?” Noel fished the gray silk scarf from his pocket and tied it around his neck. December seemed to be a bit colder every year. Or maybe it was him, some failure of his internal thermostat.

“I think Cross should turn out to be gay too.”

“Ah. A romance reader.” Noel’s gaze met Elise’s.

Elise said, “But Cross *is* gay, isn’t he?”

Elise was one of Noel’s dearest friends. His first ever book signing had been at Odyssey Books and she had loyally supported every release since. He occasionally spent the night at her Manhattan brownstone when he was in town, and Elise and her husband visited Noel’s upstate farm every summer. He liked Elise, he respected her, he trusted her, and sincerely wished he’d never gotten drunk and told her about Robert Cuffe being the inspiration for Richard Cross.

“Your sales are off the chart anyway,” Norma said. “We can’t keep *Crawl Space* on the shelves.”

“Good. That’s what I need to hear.”

“You’re going to sell a boatload,” Elise assured him. “Although some of the more conservative book reviewers are calling for your head on a pike.”

“Is that a problem?” Noel never read his reviews. “I can’t imagine the law-and-order crowd is my demographic.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. The Nash Blue books score highly with middle-aged white male readers. The witty, ribald adventures of a dashing diamond thief and his plodding police inspector nemesis? Max and his friends eat that stuff up.”

“What does Max think of Nash coming out of the closet?”

“Max knows you, so he said he always figured Nash was gay. He’s being very superior about it.”

Noel laughed. Max was as conservative as Elise was liberal, but somehow their twenty-year-old marriage worked. He envied them. Somehow he had never discovered the knack of making relationships last.

They chatted a few minutes more while Elise finished closing up, then Noel bade Norma goodnight and Elise saw him out through the side entrance to the street. She hugged herself against the chill as Noel unlocked his Porsche Boxster S.

He threw a quick, automatic look up and down the street. Old habits died hard.

“You look tired.” Elise studied him in the anemic light “It’s a long drive to Carthage. Are you sure you won’t stay over?”

Noel hesitated. He *felt* tired. More tired than he should after such a successful evening. And it *was* a long drive to Jefferson County. Nearly six hours. And, with snow forecasted, not the best driving conditions. It was tempting to take Elise up on her offer. He said reluctantly, “I think I’d better get back. We’re supposed to be getting a white Christmas.”

“You know you’re welcome to spend the holiday with me and Max.”

Another hesitation. He didn’t particularly want to spend this holiday alone. But his mood was such that he wasn’t sure he’d be very good company either.

“Thanks for asking, but I’ve got the horses to tend to.”

“Couldn’t you call someone? Don’t you pay someone to help take care of the horses?”

“I do and I could, but I don’t think I’d better.” He kissed her cheek. Elise nodded, smoothing her hands up and down her upper arms. “You’re freezing. Go inside.”

She nodded, but waited as Noel slid behind the wheel and closed the door. He pressed a button and the automatic window slid down with a whisper.

“It was a very successful launch,” she told him. “You should be very pleased.”

“I know. I am. Thank you for everything you’ve done.”

“It wasn’t me. I only doled out the champagne and beluga. People love these books, Noel. You’ve really got something. I’m not sure I would be in a hurry to end it.”

Noel nodded noncommittally.

Elise said suddenly, “Do you still leave Robert Cuffe drunken phone calls every New Year’s Eve?”

“I wish you’d forget I told you that.”

“I have a very good memory.” She was teasing, but it was affectionate. “Unfortunately for you.”

Noel nodded, studying the dashboard, absently making sure everything was in working order, ready. He never left anything to chance. Trouble had a way of finding you even when you were prepared.

“Does Cuffe ever pick up?”

That question jerked him back to the present. “No.”

“Are you sure you’re calling the right number?”

Noel smiled faintly. “I’m sure.”

In ten years, Cuffe had never picked up the phone. Noel had not spoken to him since their one and only night together. He no longer expected Cuffe to answer, but he couldn’t seem to break himself of the habit of calling. He’d started after his first book, *Ice Skate*, had been released.

That initial call had been largely an apology. Noel hadn’t realized until the

book came out and he'd begun to see it through other people's eyes that he'd portrayed Richard Cross as a buffoon. A cartoon cop. Or that that anyone at the Bureau would be reading his novels and connecting Cuffe with Cross. He'd been...playing, that's all. In some ways the novel had been his macabre version of flirting. And of course he hadn't expected the book to be a hit, let alone turn into a series. Writing at that time had mostly been therapy.

He'd heard through channels that Cuffe had taken a lot of heat after *Ice Skate*. That he'd ended up being sent to the far reaches of Wisconsin—the FBI equivalent of Siberia. And for that Noel was truly sorry. He regretted doing Robbie (as he'd come to think of Cuffe) harm. That had never been his intent.

In fact, had things been different...

But things were not different. Things were what they were.

He'd have liked to make it up to Cuffe—short of confessing his crimes and letting Cuffe arrest him—but there didn't seem to be a way to do that. Common sense, logic, told him to leave it alone. Cuffe was liable to misinterpret the phone calls too.

He'd already told himself that this year he wouldn't call. The book, the final book in the series, was apology enough. It was his last word on the subject. The Richard Cross character got the final laugh in *Crawl Space*. This time around it was Nash Blue who looked like a fool. He was certainly the loser in the game between himself and the Cross character.

It was Elise who had casually mentioned in passing the horrible possibility that perhaps Robert Cuffe wasn't officially out. In which case, rather than evening the score between them as Noel intended, the novel was liable to appear to be a further injury. Perhaps the final insult.

That was pretty much the way Noel's luck went with relationships.

He realized that Elise was still waiting, still watching him, still indefinably worried. He offered her a quick, reassuring smile.

“Merry Christmas, El.”

“Be safe, Noel.”

He said lightly, “Always.”

* * *

Noel noticed the headlights outside of Albany. He’d been abstractly aware of them since the New Jersey Turnpike, but it was as he merged onto the I-87 that he realized that he was being followed.

It gave him a shock. He was getting sloppy in his old age, no doubt about it. There had been a time he’d have noticed a tail within minutes. Not that there was a particular reason for anyone to follow him. He’d been straight—legally speaking—for eight years, and the statute of limitations had run out on his various business transactions.

Which wasn’t to say he didn’t have more than a few unsavory—or, frankly, badass—friends and acquaintances who might not have the warmest feelings for him. Not everyone had taken news of his retirement with good grace, although why anyone would wait eight years to convey their disregard was a puzzle.

Maybe, irony of ironies, he’d picked up some cretin who mistook him for an easy mark.

He took quick evasive action. He was too tired to be subtle. Too tired for the nearly six hour drive home, truth to tell, and he didn’t have the patience or energy for games. He detoured into Albany, spent a good twenty minutes dragging his shadow around the primarily commercial area—with a quick and guaranteed annoying side tour of Albany International airport—before he got back on the I-87. Having lost the tail somewhere around the Latham Quality Inn, he put the pedal to the metal and the supercharged Boxster took the bit between its teeth and silently surged forward, eating up the miles.

The telephone poles zipped past, the painted lines of the highway were a blur. By two o’clock in the morning, Noel was turning onto Old State Road. He’d made excellent time. The highway behind him was reassuringly empty as he bumped onto the dirt track that led to Blackbird Farm.

His headlights picked out the skeletal lines of white oak and beech as he drove slowly down the narrow lane. It was beginning to rain again. Fat, slushy drops

splattering against the windshield.

As the white farm house came into view something relaxed inside him. *Home*. The house was over a hundred years old. Six thousand square feet of big rooms with pine floors and double-hung windows. It sat on two hundred acres of wooded and open meadows. Noel could still recall the exact wording of the real estate listing: *This property offers plenty of options for your country getaway. Excellent hunting with abundant game and wildlife, including deer, bear, turkey, rabbits, ducks and geese. There is a beaver pond on the property as well. Hardwood, apple and pine woods in the front and meadows dotted with flowers in the back. This is the ideal investment if you are looking for privacy. No one will ever know you're there.*

It was the *no one will ever know you're there* that had sold him on the place. Whoever wrote that ad copy had been speaking the language of Noel's heart.

He parked in the garage behind the house and walked down the hill to check on the horses.

It was relatively warm inside the barn, and Noel took off his coat and scarf, tossing them to a tack bench before moving down the row of stalls, distributing flakes of green, sweet-smelling hay to each box. He found the earthy smells of horse and hay comforting. Yes, it was good to be home.

He didn't think he would do anymore signings. It had been a pleasant evening, a successful evening, but...

Pausing to stroke the long white face of Scrabble, an American Paint mare, he considered his uncharacteristic apathy.

It wasn't that anything was wrong in his life. Far from it. He was probably the safest and most secure he'd ever been. Unfortunately, security and safety had never been high priority for him.

Nor was it that he was bored. He'd worked hard to make a success of his horse farm, and he continued to work hard. As for the writing...while he wasn't keen on promotion, he enjoyed the creative process. It provided a good balance to the practical, physical labor involved in horse breeding.

No, he had no complaints. Was that the trouble? Or was it something deeper? Something it might be safer not to explore.

Most likely it was the usual holiday blues. Most people—anyone over twelve—felt let down at this time of year, didn't they? It could be a very dark time if you were alone. That was why he did his best to keep his holidays...bright.

Noel finished in the barn, slipped back into his coat and went outside, pulling the heavy doors shut.

It was still sleeting down, snow definitely in the air. He'd started back up the hill when the odd sense of being watched hit him like a thump between the shoulder blades.

He stopped, eyes raking the wet darkness.

The only light for miles was the warm glow from his front porch. The only sound was the rain pattering down, glistening on fence and roof, sparkling on the grass and in the puddles. Nothing that wasn't rain or wind moved.

He remembered another morning when he had seemed to be the only living creature left on the planet.

It was probably nothing, but he didn't like the coincidence. First being followed from the city and now...

Now what?

Nothing moved in the wet-speckled distance.

Rain trickled down the back of his neck. He was getting soaked standing there. Noel continued up the hill and let himself in the farmhouse.

* * *

Morning unfolded like a Christmas lily—snowy, cold and perfect—or like one of those glittery greeting cards. White blanketed every surface from the roof of the barn to the dark pine trees.

Noel pulled on jeans and a heavy black and white sweater he'd picked up

many years ago in Reykjavik, and stumbled outside to see to the horses.

Back inside the house, he turned on the coffee machine, lit a fire in the front parlor and started breakfast.

He was cracking eggs when the doorbell rang.

Remembering his unease the night before, Noel went into the front parlor, which offered a partial view of the long porch. He could make out the outline of the man now pounding on his front door. Tall, broad shoulders, leather jacket, dark hair cut short. What he could see of the profile looked craggy and uncompromising.

Noel's heart began to thump in hard, hopeful beats.

He went down the hall to the front door, slid the deadbolt and yanked it open.

Snow dappling his black hair and the shoulders of his leather jacket, Robert Cuffe gazed back at him.

Chapter Two

Ten years older. Ten years harder. Ten years wearier too—as though Cuffe had been chasing Noel for a decade and had finally cornered him. His black eyes held a grim gleam of satisfaction at Noel’s obvious shock.

Noel practically stuttered, “It’s...you.”

“You mean you can still recognize the original? I’m surprised.” Cuffe’s voice was deep, his tone crisp. It had softened considerably in Noel’s memory.

Noel’s eyes went wider, his lips parted. He automatically opened the door, wordless as Cuffe walked into his home.

Occasionally, rarely, he’d let himself fantasize this moment. It had gone differently in his daydreams. To start with, he was generally shaved and not smelling like the stable.

“You read my books?”

Cuffe—faced with the unsmiling, brusque reality of him made it impossible to think of him as “Robbie” now—narrowed his dark eyes. “Let’s just say I’m aware of your...work.”

Oh.

Uh-oh, in fact.

“Actually, I’d like to explain about that. I know I sort of took literary license —”

Cuffe interrupted. “I’m not interested. Consider yourself lucky I’m not a literary critic. You’d already be on your way to jail.”

That stung. “Hey, my books may not be masterpieces, but—”

“Save it, Snow. I’m here to question you in connection with a series of jewel

robberies occurring in New York City over the past three months.”

It was the last thing he’d expected. Noel’s previous astonished—if confused—delight deflated. “You’re kidding.”

Cuffe gave one curt shake of his head. Not kidding.

“But I haven’t—” Noel tried again. “But I’m straight. I have been for years.”

“I doubt that,” Cuffe said dryly.

Noel’s heart jolted at that hint of—well, what exactly? Hint that Cuffe hadn’t forgotten? How likely was that, after all? Certainly there was no trace of any softness or humor in that angular, impassive face.

“You can’t seriously think I’m still—” Noel stopped. It was true the statute of limitations had finally run out on the last of his jobs, but there could be some trap here—some technicality he could be pinned with. He’d be the first to admit he was no legal expert, and he wouldn’t put it past the FBI to try and nail him on some obscure loophole. Cuffe certainly might believe he had a score to settle.

Perhaps Cuffe read his indecision. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Whichever you prefer.”

Increasingly bewildered and uneasy, Noel said, “Do what? What’s the easy way?”

Cuffe smiled. It was more a baring of strong, white teeth. “You answer my questions now, cooperate fully. Or you can call your mouthpiece and I’ll drag your ass down to Federal Plaza and you can spend Christmas Eve in the slammer.” He added, “It’ll give you a taste of what the next couple of decades and all your future Christmases are going to be like.”

Noel was silent, trying to make sense of this. Cuffe continued to eye him with that implacable expression as though he held all the cards and they both knew it. As though he finally had Noel where he wanted him.

Finally, Noel shrugged. “I’ll answer your questions. I don’t have anything to hide.”

“No?”

“No. Listen, R-Agent Cuffe, I really am out of that life now. I’m exactly what you see.”

Cuffe looked him up and down with cool deliberation—openly unimpressed. “And that would be what?”

Noel reddened. *Definitely* not like those pleasant daydreams he’d had through the years. “I raise horses and I write books.”

“And I suppose you paid for all this from your royalty checks? You must own nearly two hundred acres.”

“About.” Noel added irritably, “You know damn well I didn’t purchase this property with earnings from my books.” Caution reasserted itself. “I’ve been lucky in my investments, that’s all.”

Cuffe snorted. Spluttered, in fact.

Noel drew himself to his full height—still a disconcertingly couple of inches shorter than Cuffe who was, by anyone’s calculations, a big guy.

Cuffe remained unimpressed. “Before you start spreading the bullshit too thick, don’t forget who you’re talking to. In real life, the other characters get to have their own ideas—and their own say.”

“Apparently you have your mind all made up.”

“Yep.”

This really was odd. Cuffe couldn’t be as sure of Noel’s involvement as he pretended or he’d have Noel in handcuffs already. No way would he waste time being polite with someone he felt he had a legitimate grudge against.

Not that you could call his manner “polite” exactly.

Or maybe that was the problem? Cuffe had to tread carefully because it was known he had a grudge against Noel Snow.

Maybe Noel's semi-celebrity status was serving to shield him. A little.

The scent of baking bread reminded him he had left biscuits in the oven. "If you're going to grill me, we might as well be comfortable. Coffee?"

After a hesitation, Cuffe shrugged. "I wouldn't say no."

Noel led the way down the hall to the kitchen. He threw over his shoulder, as he took the biscuits out of the oven, "I was in the middle of fixing breakfast."

Cuffe entered the kitchen, looking about himself curiously. Noel had put a fair bit of money into renovating the old farmhouse kitchen. There was a wide Viking stove set against a slate-tile backsplash, custom cabinets with antique glass panes, and a granite-topped built-to-order island. Functional and comfortable.

"Yep, you've done well for yourself."

Noel nearly told him then about the fall. It was the best alibi he had, after all, but he couldn't quite bring himself to confess that...vulnerability. Not when Cuffe was clearly watching for his weak spot.

Then again, maybe Cuffe already knew. Hard to believe he didn't. Maybe he knew and he didn't care because he hated Noel so much he'd be happy to see him in prison regardless of his guilt. It wasn't impossible—although he'd always figured Cuffe for a man of integrity.

But maybe he wanted to think that. Maybe that was part of his fantasy. Pouring hot coffee into a Yellowware mug for Cuffe, he topped up his own mug and leaned back against the island. "So tell me about these diamond heists I'm supposed to have committed." Noel took a sip of coffee.

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about. A series of uptown cocktail hour cat burglaries. A houseful of wealthy, pretty people, too many drinks, no one paying attention, and in you come and it's business as usual. It's your MO, right down to hitting the places as the hors d'oeuvres are served."

"It's a copycat."

“I figured you’d say that.” Cuffe picked up his mug and swallowed a mouthful of coffee.

“If it is a copycat, I’d bet money you’re still the one pulling the strings.”

Cuffe’s calm certainty shook Noel. “No way. I’m telling you, I’m strictly legitimate. I don’t need to steal.”

“You didn’t need to steal *then*. You did it for the kicks.”

Meeting Cuffe’s obsidian gaze, Noel found he had no reply. There was a lot of truth to Cuffe’s words. Noel had liked the money, no question, but he’d loved the excitement, the rush. And once Robert Cuffe had entered the game? Oh yeah, Noel had lived for their skirmishes.

Turning to the stove, he gave the now cold milk gravy a stir and turned the skillet back on. He sprinkled it with olive oil. All the while he went through the motions of preparing the food, he was trying to think. His brain felt sluggish, still working through the shock of finding Robert Cuffe on his front step.

“Have you had breakfast?”

Silence.

Noel glanced around. Cuffe was holding a snapshot from the box Noel had been sorting the day before. It was a picture of Noel, age six, on a pony. It was the first and only time he’d ridden a horse as a kid. “You can set that box anywhere.”

Cuffe returned the photo to the stack.

“Would you like something?” Noel asked. “Scrambled eggs? Biscuits and gravy?”

“No.” Cuffe added brusquely, “Thanks.”

Noel scrambled the eggs, served himself and sat down at the table. He’d lost his appetite, but he wasn’t about to let Cuffe see that.

Cuffe had moved to the window. Watching for reinforcements? He eyed Noel's plate disapprovingly. "That stuff will kill you."

Noel lifted a negligent shoulder. "Nobody lives forever."

"You're a little old for that attitude."

"Thirty-eight."

"That's what I mean."

Nettled, Noel asked, "How old are you?"

"Thirty-seven."

Funny. He'd always wondered. He'd figured Cuffe was older than him.

He dunked his biscuit in gravy and said, "I don't need those kinds of kicks now. As you so tactfully point out, I'm not a kid anymore. I know I'm not invincible. I don't want to wind up crippled, dead or in prison."

"Very touching. But you do the crime, you do the time."

"I didn't do the crime."

Cuffe raised his brows skeptically. "This time?"

Again, the suspicion that Cuffe was going to try to catch him on some technicality rose in Noel's mind.

He pushed his plate aside. "What dates are you looking at? Maybe we can settle this right now. I might have an alibi for one or two of the burglaries."

"If you're the mastermind, I'm sure you've taken care of that."

"Robbie—"

Cuffe's eyes flickered. "Special Agent Cuffe to you."

"Okay, Special Agent Cuffe—"

The doorbell rang.

Noel's hand jerked, spilling his coffee. "Hell." He picked up a napkin, mopping the puddle.

Cuffe's dark brows rose. "You seem tense, Snow. Expecting one of your confederates to drop by?"

Noel threw him an exasperated look, shoved his chair back and went to answer the bell.

Cuffe rose and unhurriedly followed, coffee mug in hand. Did he think Noel was going to attempt to flee?

Noel managed to open the door before whoever was leaning on the bell could wear it out.

Artie Schlang, a burly man in a red and black checked jacket and hunting cap stood on the step. "Got your tree," he said around his corn cob pipe.

His *tree*? Occasionally one of the horses got through the fence, but so far none of the trees had tried to make a break for it.

Looking past Artie's burly plaid shirted shoulders, Noel spotted Artie Junior standing next to the battered white pickup. There were chains on the truck tires, and the long spear of silvery spruce jutted from the truck bed.

His *Christmas* tree.

"Oh, right. I nearly forgot."

"Nearly forgot Christmas? Well, it's a good thing Christmas didn't forget you." Artie chuckled at his own oblique wit. "Where do you want it?"

"The stand's set up in the front parlor." Conscious of Cuffe's steady, silent observation, Noel propped the front door and scooted the runner out of the way as Artie left the porch. He returned a few minutes later, lugging the nine foot tree with the help of his gangling teenaged henchman.

The scent of snow and pine drifted through the open door as the Schlangs maneuvered the tree through the front door, tracking slush down the hallway and narrowly avoiding taking out a couple of brown and white Wedgwood plates on the wall and an 18th Century wooden chair with cabriole legs. They finally cornered the double doors leading into the large front parlor.

“I can take it from here.” Noel’s hand shot out as Little Artie, bundled like an armadillo, brushed against a vintage Royal Dux art deco Harlequin figurine lamp and sent it rocking.

But Artie and Little Artie would have none of that. They spent the next ten minutes struggling to get the tall and bushy giant blue spruce straight in the old tree stand.

Noel joined Cuffe who had been watching the proceedings without comment.

“You take your Christmas seriously,” Cuffe remarked.

“I do. Very.” He felt Cuffe’s curious gaze, but this was liable to lead to those things he preferred not to think of, let alone share. Least of all with Cuffe, who already was not impressed.

At last the tree was upright and steady, the fragrance of pine mingling pleasantly with the warmth and crackle of the fireplace.

Noel walked the Schlangs out, paid them a little something extra and waved them on their way.

When he returned to the house, Cuffe was in his study examining his bookshelf. It occurred to Noel that Cuffe had not shoved a search warrant in his face. What did that mean? That this was more of a fishing expedition than he’d imagined? Or that the evidence Cuffe needed was not physical?

He said from the doorway, “You can look around all you like. I don’t mind.”

Cuffe didn’t even look up. “Glad to hear it.” He was thumbing through Noel’s dog-eared *Word Menu*.

Looking up yet another word for *villain*?

Noel left him to it, going to fetch a towel to wipe up the snow and mud that had been tracked in.

As he finished up and kicked the runner back in place, he found Cuffe watching him from the doorway.

“Find anything interesting?”

“Everything about you is interesting, Snow.” Cuffe’s tone was mocking.

“And you don’t even know me yet.”

“Oh, I think I know you pretty well by now. Not as well as you think you know *me*, obviously.”

Noel’s face felt uncomfortably warm. He ignored it. “We should fix that,” he said boldly. “Why don’t we spend Christmas together?”

Cuffe didn’t move a muscle.

“No? What *are* you doing for Christmas?” Noel pushed.

“Filling out the paperwork on you, I imagine.”

“Seriously.”

“I am serious.”

He sounded serious, no lie. And yet...maybe it was that underlying mockery, as though Cuffe was enjoying a joke Noel wasn’t in on. Maybe it was the glint in his dark eyes. Nothing so friendly as a twinkle, but too sharp and hungry to be mere professional interest. Noel remembered that glint from a long ago New Year’s party just for two.

“Do you usually spend it with family?”

Cuffe said harshly, “No.”

It was such a fierce and unexpected response that it caught Noel off balance. He didn't know what to say. Somehow he had hurt Cuffe, and it was the last thing he intended.

His confusion must have showed because Cuffe said, correcting himself with a complete absence of emotion, "I used to. My parents were both killed in that Continental Airlines crash in Buffalo last February." He lifted an impatient shoulder. "Only child."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Yeah. Too bad. You could have used it in that book."

Noel stood motionless, registering that. He deserved it, of course, but it still felt unfair. Nothing he'd done, not a single word he'd written, had been intended to hurt Cuffe. He wanted to explain himself, make Cuffe understand, but this was about Cuffe's feelings, not his. Cuffe was the important one here. It would be his first Christmas since his parents' deaths and it was clearly not going to be an easy one. You couldn't pay Noel to spend a holiday with his family—or even get in touch with them—but he could still imagine how painful and lonely this holiday would be for a man like Cuffe, who obviously had been loved and knew how to love in return.

He went to Cuffe, subconsciously noting that Cuffe infinitesimally braced himself, and put his hand on the other man's arm. "I'm sorry. Very sorry, Robert." He wasn't sure if he was still sympathizing over the loss of Robert's family or apologizing for ever creating the Richard Cross character, but he was genuinely sorry.

Robert stared down at his hand. His gaze lifted, his eyes met Noel's, so dark they almost looked black. Black and—for one startling instant—soft as the fur of something quite dangerous.

A strange, tense pause when Noel thought Robert might...say something? Do something? He wasn't sure. He held his breath, waiting.

But Robert changed his mind—if, in fact, he'd had anything in mind—and Noel realized that he was still standing there clutching his arm. Probably a bit

weird. He let go and took a step back.

“Think about it at least.” What was he asking Robert to think about? He wasn’t sure. He turned away. “I’ll be right back. I need to get the Christmas ornaments out of the stable.”

“The stable? How appropriate.”

Robert’s drawl reflected none of the discomposure Noel felt. Noel laughed, mostly because he was unsure of what to do or say. There was something here he didn’t understand, undercurrents he was having trouble reading. Robert was angry, even bitter perhaps, but there was definitely attraction.

Noel might not be an expert in relationships, but he was familiar with lust, and that’s what he read in the way Robert’s moody gaze continually sought his own, lingered on his own.

Maybe he didn’t want to feel it, but the connection was still there.

The recognition warmed Noel, excited him in a way he hadn’t felt for a long time. Maybe Robert Cuffe didn’t like him, maybe he didn’t want to believe he’d gone straight, maybe he did plan to arrest him and throw him in jail. Maybe.

None of that changed the fact he still wanted Noel.

Chapter Three

“I should have done this earlier in the week. It slipped my mind with the book launch.” Noel’s boots crunched on the snow as he led the way to the barn.

Robert, who was accompanying Noel to the stable—perhaps to keep him from jumping on one of his horses and galloping away—grunted noncommittally.

Maybe bringing up the book launch wasn’t such a great idea. Noel was curious, though. Had Robert read *Crawl Space*? It had only been out four days. Surely if he’d read *Crawl Space* he’d see that Noel was trying to make amends.

Unless Elise was right, and revealing to the world that Richard Cross AKA Robert Cuffe was gay had been the final straw. He winced inwardly at the thought.

“Are you—?”

“Am I what?” Robert’s gaze turned from the paddock where the puzzled, blanketed horses wandered, exploring their snow and whickering their bemusement to each other.

“Er...out.”

“Out?” Robert’s brows drew together. “Oh, *out*. I’m not marching in this year’s Gay Pride Parade, if that’s what you mean. On the other hand, I’m not marching in the St. Patrick’s Day parade either.”

“Are you Irish?”

“I am. On both sides.”

“Is it tough being gay in the FBI?”

“Officially? The FBI does not discriminate against a person's sexual orientation. The FBI welcomes and appreciates the contribution of its LGBT employees.”

“You sound like you’re quoting from a job application. What about unofficially?”

“Law enforcement is rough on personal lives. Anybody’s personal life. So if you’ve got the kind of personal life that requires a lot of time and attention—”

“Do you? What I mean is, are you in a committed relationship?” Noel waited for the answer, aware that he was—once again—holding his breath.

“Not now.”

Noel let out a small, relieved sigh. “Me neither.”

“No.” Robert sounded pretty sure of that. How much checking up on Noel had he done?

“How hard *is* it on relationships? Your job, I mean. According to everything I’ve read—”

“Probably not as hard as being a crook.”

Noel gave Robert a sideways look. “Ow.”

Robert gave him an equally twisted smile in return.

When they reached the barn Noel led the way inside, greeting Tommy Rankin, his stableman.

“Looks like Arapaho is showing some bruising on the sole of his rear left hoof,” Tommy informed him. “We’ll need to keep an eye on him with this snow and ice.”

Noel spoke to Tommy for a few minutes, conscious of Robert poking around the stable.

“I prefer to hide my ill-gotten gains in the Amazing Gains Treat dispensers,” Noel said, when he was finally able to join Robert in the tack room. The room smelled pleasantly of leather and liniment and Robert’s aftershave. “That’s a little stable yard joke,” he added when Robert made no comment.

Robert was studying the line of framed photos and trophy cups arranged along the bottom shelf of one of the cabinets. He straightened. "In fact, you prefer a Swiss bank account."

Noel tried very hard not to show that struck home, saying casually, "Even if that were once true, I'm strictly a Bank of America customer these days."

Robert's expression was sardonic. Surprisingly, he let it pass. "Why pintos?" He nodded at the photos.

"They're not. These are American Paint horses. Different bloodlines. Do you like horses?"

"I don't know anything about them."

Noel said philosophically, "As flaws go, it's minor. We can get past that."

He almost earned a laugh. Robert asked, "Did you grow up with horses?"

"Me?" Noel did laugh. "No."

"You grew up in Arizona, right?"

Now where the hell had he managed to dig up that information? Noel said neutrally,

"That's right. We didn't have horses. The boxes I need are in the hayloft."

Robert followed him out of the tack room. Noel would have preferred to do this without an audience. He'd have preferred not to do it at all, in fact, but he refused to give in to the doctors and therapists who had told him his best bet was to keep both feet firmly planted on the ground.

He picked up the long ladder, propped it against the edge of the loft, fixed his gaze on the old dart board on the wall, gripped the ladder tightly and began to climb.

It was worse knowing he had an audience. When he was relaxed, focused, he could usually manage about four feet before the vertigo hit him, but this

morning, three rungs up, his stomach flopped over, sweat broke out across his shoulders and his head began to swim.

Noel gripped the sides of the ladder so hard his knuckles hurt. He kept his gaze fastened on the dart board and reminded himself the ladder was not really whirling out from under his feet.

Keeping his head very still, he managed another rung. He wasn't even halfway up the ladder. The loft seemed miles away, the ladder might as well have been a stairway to the stars. He was never going to make it, and even if he did, no way could he get those boxes and climb down again. It had been a stupid idea to store the boxes up there. A decision driven by emotion rather than logic. A refusal to face facts.

"Something wrong?" Robert asked.

Noel didn't dare look at him. He cleared his throat. "No. I don't think the ornaments are up here."

"How would you know? You can't see anything from there."

"No. Only I...don't remember putting them up here." He was conscious of floorboards squeaking beneath Robert's footsteps, aware of Robert coming to stand beneath the ladder.

Great. At least he'd have a cushion to fall on if his grip gave out.

"What's up there you don't want me to know about?" Robert's tone was suspicious again.

Noel made the mistake of turning his head to look down. All the logic in the world couldn't defy the sensation that the ladder had turned a cartwheel. He instinctively moved to steady himself, but as he was already balanced, the sudden shifting of weight threw him off center. The ladder slid sideways. He heard wood knocking wood, scraping as it slid.

He knew how to fall. He knew he wasn't far off the ground. Despite the vertigo, he knew he was not really tumbling head over heels. He was dropping to the floor. Nothing to it. He'd fallen from far greater heights than this.

He let go and tried to relax his muscles.

A sickening moment of sailing through empty space—

Slam.

Solid, warm flesh. Hard arms locked around him. Noel's feet were on the ground and he and Robert did a clumsy shuffle step across the rough floor boards.

"What was that about?" Robert asked.

It felt good to stand in the circle of Robert's arms. It felt good to rest fleetingly against human support. Noel lifted his eyelashes. There it was again, that indefinable emotion in Robert's eyes—a flare of response in the dark gaze a few inches from his own. Robert's breath was warm on his face, his mouth close enough to kiss.

If Robert would only...

And it was there in Robert's face. He wanted to. He was considering it.

Noel waited, barely breathing, watching Robert's conflicted face from beneath his eyelashes. He didn't want to seduce Robert again. This time Robert had to make the move.

He was conscious of the quiet warmth of the stable, the sweet smells of hay and alfalfa, the more earthy scents of horse and human—

Conscious—*shit!*—of Tommy's footsteps approaching and then quickly—but not quickly enough—retreating.

Robert's hands dug into his arms and he was pushed away. "What was that supposed to be?" Robert sounded slightly out of breath. Noel wasn't sure if he was referring to the fall or the attempted kiss.

"If you don't know, one of us has a problem."

"Tell me something I don't know."

Robert was already moving away, going to straighten the ladder which had wedged mid-fall behind a cross beam.

“Why don’t I have a look at what’s in this loft.”

“Be my guest.”

Robert planted the ladder against the shelf once more and scaled it quickly. Noel eyed him critically. Not built for cat burglary, that was for sure, but he moved well. Powerfully, swiftly. He had a good sense of balance. Noel liked that in a man.

He was grinning at his own nonsense when Robert reached the loft and disappeared.

He reappeared with a large box marked Christmas. “Something funny?”

“Yeah, but the joke’s on me. You can go ahead and drop that box.”

“Drop it?”

“It’s light enough. And it’s well-packed.”

The box came hurtling down and Noel fielded it easily.

Robert went to get the next one. In all he dropped three cardboard boxes down to Noel.

They carried the large containers out of the barn and up the hillside. For the first time Noel really noticed Robert’s parked car. A sports sedan, not an FBI sedan. Noel had seen enough of those in the old days to recognize them a mile off.

Though possibly not at night.

He directed a narrow look at Robert. “Was that you following me last night?”

“Were you being followed last night?” Robert asked blandly.

“It was you.”

“The wicked flee when no man pursueth.”

Noel was sure now. “It was you.”

“If it *was* me, I might have a thing or two to say to a lunatic who drives one hundred and thirty miles per hour under poor road conditions.”

“If you hadn’t startled the hell out of me, I wouldn’t have been speeding.”

“What happened to that famous icy nerve?”

Noel started to answer, but his attention was caught by an old-fashioned pickup with a holly wreath adorning its grill trundling down the road toward them.

“Now what?”

“For the middle of nowhere, you get a lot of visitors,” Robert observed, and Noel didn’t think it was his imagination that Robert’s voice echoed his own exasperation.

“Not usually. This is one of my neighbors. Francis Rich.”

Noel carried the two boxes he held to the edge of the porch, setting them down as Francis pulled into the front yard in a great semi-circle, spraying snow.

The truck was still rolling to its stop as he jumped out and came running toward the porch. He was a plump young man with shoulder-length curly brown hair. He wore a brown and white poncho and square spectacles.

“Noel!”

Noel was conscious of Robert right behind him, and for the first time his presence at Noel’s shoulder felt supportive rather than custodial. Or maybe that was simply Noel believing what he wanted to believe.

“What’s wrong, Francis?”

Francis’s round face worked. “A newborn cria is stuck in a crevice on your

property.”

Noel’s heart plummeted too. “Is it still alive?”

“It was ten minutes ago. But I can’t get it out on my own.”

“What in God’s name is a crias?” Robert asked, looking from one of them to the other.

“Cria. It’s a baby llama,” Noel explained. “Francis breeds them.” He’d have liked to ask Francis what the hell a cria was doing getting stuck in crevices on his property, especially today of all days, but a couple of years worth of living next door to a llama farm had taught him that llamas were very good at finding the weak spot in any fence and wandering on through.

“Can’t you call the fire department or something?”

Noel laughed at the innocence of city slickers. To Francis he said, “I’ve got rope and canvas in the stable. We should be able to make some kind of a sling and get it out.”

“Yes. Please. Hurry,” Francis urged. “I’m afraid his mother will get stuck, too, trying to get him out.”

“You’re breeding llamas?” Robert’s tone was skeptical, as though he suspected the llamas might be a cover for a more sinister animal.

“Llama’s are exceptionally smart and resourceful animals,” Francis informed him, trailing them up the stairs as Noel snatched up the stacked boxes of ornaments and carried them into the house.

“Getting stuck in a crevice doesn’t sound exceptionally smart to me.”

Noel ignored the exchange behind him as he grabbed an LL Bean field coat and gloves from the closet beneath the stairs. What a day. He still hadn’t showered or shaved. No wonder Robert was keeping him at arm’s distance—and he hadn’t even started fooling around with llamas yet.

Behind him Francis was still extolling the virtues of llamas to Robert, who was

making polite but unconvinced noises.

“Will you be here when I get back?” Noel asked, zipping his coat.

“Sure I will. Because I’m going with you.”

“Good! The more hands the better,” Francis said.

“I’ll be right back,” Noel told him, and he set off for the barn followed by Robert.

“You know, you really don’t have to go,” Noel said as they slipped and slid their way down the now much-traveled hillside. “This won’t take long.”

“I disagree. How do I know you won’t take this opportunity to try and make a break for it?”

Noel stopped walking. Robert couldn’t be serious. And yet...he looked totally dead pan.

“You can’t—Why would I? I live here. I’ve been living here for nearly a decade. I’m not running from you or anyone else.”

“That’s easy to say.”

“I call *you* every year.”

Robert stared at him.

“I’m not hiding from you, Robert. Far from it.”

Robert’s mouth gave a curious twist. His gaze faltered. It was the strangest expression. Noel couldn’t tell if it was the face of a man about to laugh or cry, but just as quickly the look was gone and Robert had his usual mask in place.

Noel knew it was a mask because he remembered, had held on as tight as he could to the memory, of every minute of their one and only night together. The Robert Cuffe he had known had been surprisingly funny and disarmingly tender beneath the requisite tough guy facade. What had happened to that man?

He had to still be there because, despite Robert's accusations, Noel was increasingly confident Robert couldn't truly believe him guilty of those recent cat burglaries. He was too smart, for one thing. No matter how similar the new rash of burglaries was to Noel's old pattern, there had to be enough differences that there were doubts in Robert's mind.

Besides, if he'd come there determined to arrest Noel, he'd have his G-ride. He'd have brought uniformed police officers with him.

"Maybe if you told me what this is really all about I could help you."

"Plea bargaining already?"

Irritated, Noel turned away and continued to the barn. Robert, perhaps in a show of faith—or perhaps in a show of weariness—waited on the hillside. Inside the barn, Noel grabbed rope and a sheet of canvas and hurried back to the rust colored pickup.

The three of them squeezed into Francis's truck with Daisy, his Australian sheepdog. The cab smelled like llama and wet dog. At least, that's what Noel hoped it smelled like. Hopefully his lack of grooming wasn't catching up with him.

As Francis tore down the road and across the snowy pasture, he offered a hand to Robert. "By the way, I'm Francis Rich. I own Hidden Creek Llama Ranch."

Robert, eyes not leaving the snowy road—the truck was doing enough of that—briefly shook hands. "Robert Cuffe."

"Where do you know Noel from, Robert?"

Robert said pleasantly, "I know him from the old days."

Noel stared straight ahead, waiting for the rest of it. He was surprised Robert had bothered to be that discreet. Not that it mattered in this case.

Francis, of course, merely laughed. "Are you one of his old gang? We're always trying to get Noel to tell us about his ill-gotten glory days."

“Were your glory days ill gotten too?” Robert inquired of Noel.

Noel looked back at him but declined to answer.

Robert asked, “And how is the old gang?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“No? Well, your old pal Chickie is doing a ten year stretch in Dannemora for grand larceny.”

Noel shivered. He’d known that was inevitable. Mostly he’d worked on his own, but when he used a partner, he used Chick MacEvoy. Chick was one of the best second story men around, but he wasn’t famous for his patience or planning.

“Yep,” Robert said thoughtfully, and Noel knew they were pressed too close to each other for him to have missed that shiver. “The past has a way of catching up with everyone sooner or later.”

Chapter Four

Two llamas stood side by the side on the snowy track, chewing their cud and watching solemnly as sentries as the pickup bumped and ground its way to the side of the road.

Robert opened the door, grunting as Daisy scrambled over him and jumped out. The men followed, wading through the shin-high snow to the back of the truck.

On the slight knoll above them stood another shaggy llama. She appeared to be gazing down into the rocks. The weird clucking-humming noise she made carried down the hillside. Frances was making worried clucking noises too. Noel's eyes met Robert's and he smiled faintly.

The other llamas wandered up as Noel lifted the tarp and rope out of the truck bed. They poked their muzzles into Francis's jacket pockets and he petted them absently.

"I hope that rope is long enough."

Noel stopped. "What do you mean, you hope the rope is long enough? How deep is this crevice?"

Francis looked flustered. "Well, it's..." He spread his hands wide, far above his head.

"Seriously?" Robert asked of no one in particular.

"When you said *crevice*," Noel asked, "did you maybe mean *crevasse*?"

"Er...maybe," Francis admitted.

Noel sighed, but what was the use in giving vent to all the things he longed to say? Francis was...Francis.

They climbed up the knoll, Daisy trotting ahead of them, her wagging tail

dusting the snow as she ran.

As they reached the top, the mother llama picked her way sure-footedly over to them, making a strange sound that mostly resembled a squashed moo.

“All right, Mama. Help is on the way,” Francis reassured her.

Noel walked over to the “crevice” and gazed down. He could make out what looked like a leggy ball of white fluff tucked about thirty feet down. Two things were immediately clear to him. That animal was not getting out of there on its own—and Francis was too wide to make it through the narrow fissure of an opening.

That left...

He glanced around. It was beginning to get crowded on the knoll between humans, dog and the other llamas. Robert joined him, staring down at the cria.

“How long is the rope you brought?”

“Long enough. A hundred feet.”

The small llama was faintly echoing the worried hum of its mother.

“How the hell did that happen? I thought you said llamas were supposed to be smart?”

“They are, but they’re curious, too, and that one’s probably only a few hours old. They’re usually born in the daylight.”

“You seem to know a lot about llamas.”

“They get through Francis’s fence a lot, so I’ve spent some time listening to him on the subject.”

Francis was on his knees on the other side of the hole in the ground peering anxiously down. One hand steadied his glasses perched precariously on his nose. The mother llama peered down with him. A small echoing hum rose from the cria.

“There *must* be a way I can get down there,” Francis fretted.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Robert said. He looked from Noel to Francis as though trying to determine the extent of the threat. “You’re dreaming.”

It was blunt but honest. No way was portly Francis going to manage to wriggle through that opening. Robert could probably make it. Though he was muscular, he was lean, and he seemed reasonably limber. But the obvious choice was Noel.

Noel knelt, trying to get a better view of the shelf where the cria lay. Going down was probably not the problem. Or at least not as big a problem as climbing up would be. Either way, it was nothing he hadn’t done a million times—though, granted, not since his fall.

“I’ll do it.”

Francis look relieved. “No, no. I’ll do it, of course. I only brought you here to lend a hand. I’ll make the climb. It’s my little lost llama.”

Noel happened to be watching Robert, so he saw him roll his eyes.

“You’d probably better let me do it, Francis.” Noel rose, dusting the snow from his gloved hands. “I’ve got more experience at this kind of thing.”

Robert made that sound that fell somewhere between a snort and a splutter. “Yes, any time a llama went missing you were always my first thought.”

Noel tossed the coil of rope at him. “Make yourself useful and tie that around that tree trunk.”

“Tree trunk? That’s optimistic.” Robert took the coiled rope and carried it to the lightning blasted stump of pine tree. He looped the rope around the trunk to anchor it, hauled on it hard to test its resistance, and then walked back with the lengths looped around his arm. He moved toward Noel, but Noel waved him away.

“It’s not for me. I’m going to use the tarp to make a sling and lift the calf up that way.”

“Cria.”

“Right. Anyway, it’ll be safer for both of us in case it freaks and starts struggling.”

“Tie it around your waist climbing down at least. There’s no reason to take a chance when you don’t have to.”

“And here I was thinking you’d enjoy watching me break my neck.”

“Not in front of Francis.”

Noel was busy tying one of the ends of rope around his waist. Robert was right. No need to take stupid chances. Beyond the stupid chance he was taking in climbing down there to start with.

When he finished tying a neat mountain climber’s knot, he started to move away. Robert hooked a hand beneath his arm. “Hold it.”

He reached for Noel’s waist and double-checked the knot.

“It’s not Everest you know.”

“I know. It’s at least twenty feet down and there’s loose rock and ice.”

Noel nodded. “If this keeps up, I’m going to start thinking you care.”

“Always the wiseass. Just watch what you’re doing.”

“Piece of cake.”

“Please be careful,” Francis said as Noel squatted on the ledge.

“It’s okay, Francis.” Noel swung a leg over the edge. He kept his gaze trained on the tree the rope was tied to.

Mind over matter. You know what you’re doing. You’ve done it hundreds of times.

He ignored that sickening shift, the conviction that his equilibrium was sliding

out from under him. His gaze dropped to his gloved hands gripping tightly to the outthrust rock. Snow dusted the black wool and he could see every sparkling crystal blazing like diamonds in the sunlight.

Slowly, cautiously, he felt with his right foot for a toe hold. There was another disorienting slide, but he knew—logic told him—that regardless of the message his body was sending, he was perfectly all right. He was not moving. The hillside was not moving.

A hand clamped down on his wrist.

Noel looked up.

Robert was leaning down, his head blotting out the sun, throwing his face in shadow. Even so, Noel could make out the predatory gleam of his eyes.

“What’s going on?”

“Huh?” Noel was confused. “Nothing’s going on.”

“Bullshit.” Robert leaned closer as though trying to read his face. “There’s something wrong with you. There’s a problem with your equilibrium, isn’t there?”

Talk about lousy timing. “It’s no big deal. All I have to d—”

“Get up. Get out of there.” The hand locked around Noel’s wrist, tightened. He couldn’t free himself without struggling and no way could he afford any fast moves balanced as he was.

“What is it? What’s happening?” Francis asked, looking worriedly from Noel to Robert. Daisy trotted up and down the opening, whining. Even the llamas were gargling at him. In another time and place it might have been funny.

Or...not.

“Change of plan,” Robert said, brisk and businesslike. “I’m climbing down and Noel will hang onto the rope.”

“The hell.” Noel’s normal pragmatism gave way to affronted male ego.

Infuriatingly though, the rope looped around Robert’s large gloved mitt was already being retracted. He held his other hand out. His own balance apparently unshakable. “Come on, Noel. Let’s not waste any more time. You trying to climb down there is a very bad idea and you know it.”

Noel. It sounded natural coming from Robert. It sounded...nice. Which didn’t change the fact that he was totally incensed at being treated like he was helpless.

“No way. I can handle this. I just have to go slow. I’ve still got more experience than you have.”

“You have no idea of my experience. Now get up here.”

“You won’t fit through this opening.”

Robert laughed. “Now you’re being rude because you’re pissed off.”

Partly. Not entirely. Robert was going to be a tight fit. If he was in the least claustrophobic, it would be a no go.

“Chop chop. Little lost llama is waiting.”

“Oh for—” Noel slapped his gloved hand into Robert’s and let himself be drawn the rest of the way up. That change in angle and speed of movement sent his stomach plummeting and his balance skittering away. He had to close his eyes for a second, and that—as always—made it worse.

He stumbled up over the edge as Robert rose. Noel reeled into Robert’s solid chest. A hard supportive arm fastened around him and for a moment he leaned there while the world went spinning away. He could feel Robert’s heart pounding against his own through the canvas of his field jacket and the leather of Robert’s coat.

After a few seconds he became aware of Robert’s lips moving almost soundlessly against his ear. “If you think the earth moved just now, imagine what’ll happen when I fuck you.”

Noel's head snapped up. He stared in wide-eyed disbelief. Had Robert...had he really whispered that or was Noel dreaming? Maybe Noel had slipped and knocked himself out because there was absolutely nothing to read on Robert's face. Nothing but that funny glitter in his eyes.

Maybe Noel was finally losing it.

Or maybe Robert really *had* made the most astonishing statement Noel had ever heard.

Noel fumbled with the rope. He untied it, handed it over and watched, wordless, as Robert swiftly knotted the line with the ease of, yes, experience.

"You're not dressed for climbing."

"Now there you're right," Robert admitted. "But as you've pointed out, it's not that tough of a climb."

He was going and that was that. Noel swallowed his other objections.

"Geronimo." Robert's impassive gaze held Noel's as he leaned back against the rope and stepped off. Right before he completely disappeared over the edge, he winked.

Winked.

Noel nearly let the line slip through his hands. What the...?

He recovered, saying, "Help me, Francis. I don't trust that tree stump to hold." Francis clambered over the rocks to hang onto the rope. Robert's weight was considerable even with the broken pine tree taking most of it.

Noel slowly played out the rope, tracking Robert's progress in his mind. Even so, he was unprepared for when the rope went slack.

Noel and Francis went to the mouth of the crevasse, watching as Robert untied the rope, knelt, and fashioned the sling for the llama. He threaded the rope through the tarp rivets, drawing the plastic into a large sack. Immediately, the cria tried to poke its head out of the opening.

Robert took a couple of minutes to soothe the frightened animal, but with minimal success. “Guys,” he called. “We’re losing our window of opportunity. If you’re going to pull her up, now’s the time.”

Midway up the cria began to fight to get out of the tarp.

Francis started squawking. Noel swore. Together, hand over hand, they dragged the tarp up, doing their best to keep it from slamming into the rough and rocky side of the fissure. The frightened animal kicked and wriggled to be free, bleating its terror. The adult llamas echoed its cries.

At last Noel and Francis hauled the tarp over the side and the cria fell out, struggling onto spindly legs and weaving as it ran off, barely missing tumbling back down the crevice. The mother llama trotted after it.

Noel interrupted Francis’s thanks. He leaned cautiously over the edge. Robert was climbing quickly and calmly. He was already more than halfway up.

“Here comes the rope.” Noel called.

“No. Save it. Nearly there.”

Noel watched tensely, but it really wasn’t a difficult climb for a guy in excellent shape who knew what he was doing—both of which perfectly described Robert.

In another couple of minutes he was topside once more, out of breath but otherwise no worse for—

“You’re bleeding.” Noel frowned, watching tiny crimson drops fall to the snow.

“I sliced my palm on a rock climbing up.” Robert wiped his hand on his charcoal trousers. “It’s nothing.” He studied Noel’s expression and his mouth curved. “It really is nothing.”

Noel nodded. He remembered what Robert had said before he’d gone down to rescue the cria. Had he meant it? Or was Robert paying him back in mind games? The more time he spent with Robert, the more confused he felt.

Shoulder to shoulder, they waited as Daisy chased the llamas back across the meadow and through the fence. As the dog and llamas disappeared behind the trees, Francis trudged back across the snowy field.

They piled back in the truck and headed back to Noel's.

* * *

The first aid kit was in the master bathroom, which meant leading Robert through Noel's bedroom. Robert looked around with unabashed curiosity at the large white iron bed, the box of shells on the old trunk at the foot of the bed, the ornate bird cage atop the huge mirrored green armoire. The sage green armoire was the very first piece of furniture Noel had purchased for this house. The first piece of furniture he had ever purchased for himself.

"You have eclectic tastes," Robert commented. "I particularly like the telescope pointing out your bedroom window."

"It's so that I can see the stars."

"That's what they all say."

Noel laughed. "Come on. The medical center is in here."

The bathroom had retained some of its vintage charm, but the tub was pure modern convenience. A deep sunken whirlpool with heated jets of water. You didn't survive as many falls from heights as Noel had without picking up a significant amount of aches and pains along the way—and that didn't even include the fall that had put him out of business once and for all.

"Nice," Robert remarked. He lowered himself to the side of the tub and gingerly rolled up his sleeves. "All the conveniences of an expensive spa."

That sarcastic note was back in his voice. Noel said, "Would you like a soak?"

Robert looked briefly nonplussed. "No."

"It's big enough for two."

"It's big enough for two with a couple of llamas thrown in."

Noel fished the first aid kit out from beneath the sink and knelt down in front of Robert. He couldn't help noticing that beneath the tailored, though now ruined, trouser front, Robert was hard. Impressively hard.

Maybe he *was* staring because Robert pointedly thrust his torn palm in front of Noel's face. The cut was in the fleshy part of Robert's hand below the thumb. It wasn't bad. Nothing requiring stitches. But it looked painful. Noel gently swabbed it with antiseptic.

"Does it hurt?"

"Only when I laugh," Robert said dryly.

Noel huffed a laugh of his own. He looked up. Robert's face stilled.

"Did you mean it?" Noel asked in jerky monosyllables.

"Mean what?"

"What you said on the knoll."

Robert's eyebrows arched. "That you have no idea of my extensive experience?"

Noel stared. Robert's expression was politely blank, even bland. He met Noel's eyes with a look of mild interest.

Noel's hope withered. He looked down, finished bandaging Robert's hand. Robert had nice hands. Large but well-shaped. Strong hands, but Noel knew for a fact that they could be gentle, that they could be loving. He swallowed hard, carefully pressing the last bit of sticky tape to skin, and then bent his head and kissed the uninjured part of Robert's palm.

Robert's hand flexed, but he said nothing.

"There." Noel tried to say it lightly, as if soothing a child's hurt, but the word came out sounding stifled.

He could feel Robert's tension, though Robert still didn't speak.

Noel rested on his heels. “Did you mean what you said about fucking me?” He stared at the torn knees of Robert’s trousers.

Even to himself he sounded strained.

“You fucked me, didn’t you?”

That time Noel couldn’t meet Robert’s eyes. It was true. True by every definition, and yet he’d never intended harm. He was just so...awful at relationships. Sex? No problem. Relationships? It was hard to imagine anyone worse than himself.

Unless it was maybe Robert?

He risked a quick look. Robert stared down at his bandaged hand, the place where Noel had kissed him. His expression was, as usual, indecipherable to Noel.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. I swear it.”

Robert’s thick lashes flicked up. He regarded Noel steadily.

“And I’m not involved in any illegal activities. None. I don’t even fudge my taxes.”

“Oh, I know. We audit your taxes.”

A chilling reminder that Uncle Sam, at least, did not forgive or forget.

Noel took a breath. Braced himself for the hardest fall of all. “If you did—do—want to...fuck me...that would be—”

Robert cut across as though he hadn’t heard. “What happened to you? Some kind of head injury? Something that affects your balance?”

Well, that was clear enough. Noel rose to wash his hands at the sink. The image of himself in the oval mirror didn’t raise his confidence: flattened fair hair, a day’s worth of beard, fatigue smudges under his green eyes. He looked as disreputable as Robert seemed to think he was. “I fractured my skull in a fall.”

He could see Robert's reflection in the mirror. He looked horrified. It was fleeting, but it was comfortingly genuine.

"I was on vacation. That's the funny part. I was climbing in the Pyrenees."

"What happened?"

"I actually don't know. I've heard the official account, but as far as I know, one minute I was climbing, the next I was waking up in a French hospital. To make a long story short, my right inner ear was permanently damaged and that... was that."

"You can't do heights anymore."

"I'm not complaining. Hell, I couldn't stand up at first. I honest to God couldn't tell which way was up. It felt like the earth was rolling under my feet. Then I got to the point where I could walk so long as I could run my hand against a wall or hang onto something. Then it was stairs I couldn't manage. Now, I'm mostly fine."

"Except on ladders or rappelling down cliffsides."

"Yep. That's about right."

"How the hell do you ride?"

"Sometimes I can't. But a horse's walking gait is a gentle, repetitive movement, similar to a human's gait. Riding improved my balance, posture, mobility and reactive time. Obviously I don't compete anymore." Swimming could also be weird and the common cold flattened him in more ways than one. "So you see, I'm not your cat burglar."

Robert didn't speak, didn't react.

It was such an odd pause and it went on for so long that Noel didn't know what to say. It would have helped if he knew how to read Robert, but Robert without Oakleys was more unreadable than most G-men with them.

"If you really have been watching me, you *can't* think I'm still pulling jobs."

Robert opened his mouth.

The doorbell chimed once more, cutting off whatever he might have replied.

Chapter Five

“That must be The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come,” Robert said.

Noel’s short laugh was more frustrated than amused. “I’ll be right back. Why don’t you run yourself a hot bath?” Personally, he’d have killed for a hot bath. Especially if he could have shared it with Robert.

“I have a feeling it’d be like bathing in Grand Central Station.” Robert rose, tugging down his shirt sleeves.

“It’s not usually like this. I go days without seeing or speaking to anyone.” That had been one of the big attractions when he’d first moved way out to the middle of nowhere. Although, he’d thought for some time it would be nice to have someone with whom to share this wealth of solitude.

The door bell was still ringing, interspersed with energetic thumps on the door. A dark misshapen form could be seen through the frosted glass panel.

“Damn.” Noel crossed to the front parlor and stared out the window. A yellow VW van was parked in the front yard next to Robert’s sedan. The windows were tinted dark, the side panels were painted with angels and fairies and mystical signs.

“What the hell is that?” Robert asked from right behind him. Noel concealed his start. Robert moved quietly for a big man—an ability Noel appreciated.

“Valspar.”

“What’s a Valspar?”

“Who. She’s a...well, I guess you’d call her a psychic.”

“I’m guessing I’d call her something else.”

Noel ruefully acknowledged that and went to the door.

“Noel. By all the powers that be. I was starting to think you weren’t home.” Valspar was a heavy set woman with yellow hair in dreadlocks and a face like a new moon. In a grand defiance of the elements, she wore a lace blouse and a black velvet skirt with red roses beneath a long green cape.

“I’m here,” Noel assured her, wishing it were otherwise.

“The generator in the greenhouse has gone out and the plants are freezing. Merry Christmas!” Valspar added, catching sight of Robert.

Robert raised a hand in greeting.

“Will you come?” Valspar’s focus returned to Noel. “Please?”

Noel swallowed the unChristmassy answer on the tip of his tongue. “Of course.”

“Bless you.”

“I’ll follow you over.”

Valspar nodded and bustled back to her van. Noel closed the door and went to find his field jacket where he’d left it in the bedroom.

“This won’t take long. Why don’t you have a bath,” he told Robert, who was watching him from the bedroom doorway.

“That’s what you said the last time. And, by the way, I’m starting to take this preoccupation with my hygiene personally.”

Noel spluttered a laugh, shouldering into his jacket. “I’d kill for a hot bath right now. And a nap.”

“You do look tired.” Robert’s scrutiny seemed less clinical than before. “You’re not going to try to climb anything are you?”

“No. God no.” Noel felt his pockets for his gloves and scarf. “That damned generator goes out at least once every six months or so. But it’s usually easy to repair.”

“Somehow I never figured you for the good neighbor type.” Robert picked up his own coat from the rocking chair by the window.

“That’s why you should hang around a while. Get to know me.” Noel watched Robert pull on his coat.

Robert raised his brows. “Save you the price of a long distance phone call this year?”

“Yeah. That’s it.”

Robert smiled faintly.

* * *

“Why *did* you start leaving those messages?” Robert asked once they were on their way down the snowy lane toward the woods where Valspar lived.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

Robert made a derisive sound.

“It’s the truth. What other reason would I have?”

Robert didn’t reply.

“Why didn’t you pick up?”

“I didn’t want to talk to you.”

“No, I guess not.”

Staring out the side window, Robert said, “Even if I had...wanted to talk to you, you must have realized it was impossible.” There was a trace of bitterness in his voice. “I should have turned those calls over to the Bureau.”

“You didn’t?”

“I was enough of a laughing stock as it was.”

It was a few seconds before Noel could trust his voice. “I didn’t want you to

forget me.”

“What?”

“I knew we couldn’t—that there wasn’t a way for us to—but I didn’t want you to forget me,” he admitted. “It sounds childish. I guess it was. I wanted your attention.”

Robert was silent so long Noel didn’t think he would answer. “It would be hard to forget you when you made me a character in your books.”

Noel swallowed. “I was trying to be funny.”

“Yep, I could see that.”

“I wasn’t trying to—” Noel said helplessly, “Robert, I don’t know how to do this stuff. I never learned. I haven’t had a lot of relationships.”

“You haven’t had any that I can find,” Robert said coolly. “Not since adulthood. You don’t have relationships. Hell, you don’t even have affairs. You have a history of paying for sex, high-class prostitutes for the most part, and never the same partner twice in a row.”

Noel could find no reply. He felt numb hearing the pathetic truth laid out in such chilly, impersonal terms. A good and timely reminder that for Robert, he was, and probably always would be, merely a case. A cold case. The one that got away.

If he was lucky.

They had reached Valspar’s. Noel turned in through the white gate festooned with wreaths and painted metal angels playing an assortment of musical instruments.

They parked and got out, Noel leading the way around the sides of the pink hexagonal-shaped house to the greenhouse in back. Through the glass they could see Valspar inside the greenhouse fussing over plants. She waved to them.

Noel went to the generator, kneeling in the snow and checking the fuel levels.

Valspar came around the greenhouse to join them. “How do you know Noel?” she asked Robert.

“We go way back.”

“Oh, how nice. And you’re spending Christmas? I always try to get Noel to come here, but you know how he is.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Very fond of his own home and hearth. But no one should be alone on the holidays.”

“No.”

Noel scowled at the front panel of the generator and bit back all the brutal things he’d have liked to tell Robert. So Robert thought he knew him? Based on one night and a lot of police reports? And on that meager information he was daring to judge Noel? Robert didn’t have a fucking clue.

He didn’t say any of it, though. He listened to Robert’s single terse response to the idea of spending Christmas alone, and he choked it all down. Robert was alone this Christmas and he was in pain, whether he would admit it or not, and if it made him feel better to needle Noel, to get his jabs in, fine.

Noel probably owed him that much.

He gave the generator an experimental crank. It turned over but, after a promising growl, died.

“It’ll crank but it won’t start?” he said to Velspar.

“That’s right. That’s a new one, isn’t it? You’ve practically rebuilt it by now.”

“Mm.”

“Dirty air filter?” suggested Robert. “Dirty spark plugs? Low oil?”

“It’s not the oil. I checked.” Noel inspected the cables and then the battery

posts. “These are corroded.” To Velspar, he said, “Can you bring me a jug of warm water mixed with baking soda?”

“How much baking soda?”

“I’ll go with you,” Robert said.

He departed with Velspar, making noncommittal replies to her cheerful chatter about how absolutely brilliant Noel was with wiring and electronics. No doubt Robert was hoping to hear something incriminating. Something that would allow him to lock Noel up so that he could throw away the key and forget about him.

Noel scraped at the fuzzy pale gunk over the metal posts, but eventually he stopped and sat down in the snow. He could rarely remember feeling this tired and let down. To think that, for a moment there this morning, it had looked like it was going to be the best Christmas ever. He could almost smile at his naïveté now.

“Are you falling asleep?” Robert’s voice came from overhead.

Noel sat up quickly. “No.”

“I don’t recommend sitting in snow for any length of time.”

“I didn’t think it would be a length of time.” He got to his knees, took the plastic jug, and began pouring it carefully over the corroded posts. The acid fizzed and dissolved away in a gray stream.

“I offered to read Robert’s palm, but I think he’s shy.” Valspar sounded out of breath as she joined them. She was holding a large blue and gold festively wrapped parcel.

“Is he?” Noel gave the generator a hard crank. The engine coughed, snarled, and caught. They backed away from the deafening roar as the generator got back to work keeping Valspar’s herbs and flowers warm.

“Praise the powers that be,” Velspar exclaimed. “And you, too, Noel.”

He smiled tiredly.

“Would you like to come in for some eggnog?”

Even if he hadn't been standing there in wet jeans and with less than three hours sleep, Noel wouldn't have been up to hearing Valspar sing his praises to Robert's stony face. “We've got to get back.”

“In that case, Merry Christmas!” Velspar handed him the wrapped parcel. “It's the usual. A jar of my crabapple preserves.”

She walked them back to the car, talking all the while. As Noel opened the Boxster's door, she gave him a brilliant smile. “Even without doing Robert's reading, I can tell that you're both going to be very happy. If you could only see your auras!”

Chapter Six

When they reached Blackbird Farm, Noel broke the silence that had persisted on the short drive home. “I’m going to have a shower. Why don’t you fix yourself a drink?” He handed Robert the wrapped jar of preserves and pointed him toward the drinks cabinet. “Pour me one as well.”

A hot shower, a shave and clean clothes made a world of difference. Noel was still tired, still short on sleep, but his natural optimism began to reassert itself. He hadn’t dreamed that comment on the knoll. Robert wanted him. He might not *like* Noel but, if ten years later he was still looking forward to taking his turn in bed, Robert did feel some connection.

He found Robert in the kitchen doing the breakfast dishes.

Robert glanced up, his gaze lingered for a moment. He nodded to Noel’s drink on the table.

“Thanks.” Noel sat down, glanced idly at the stack of old photos, studied Robert’s broad shoulders, the long, muscular line of his back, and his narrow hips. “If you want a shower, I can find a pair of sweats that’ll probably fit you and I’ll put your clothes through the washer.”

Robert rinsed the last soapy mug and placed it in the basket. He leaned against the sink and folded his arms.

“Here’s the way I see it. Basically you were forced to retire. If your balance hadn’t been affected, you’d still be out there robbing people.”

Clearly Robert was still wrestling with this. He sounded as though he and Noel were continuing an ongoing conversation. In a funny way it gave Noel hope. Robert wouldn’t be struggling with this if it didn’t matter to him.

“No. I was already planning to get out.”

“That’s easy to say.”

“It’s the truth.”

When Robert didn’t reply, Noel said, “I’m not trying to pretend it was a moral decision because I don’t regret anything I did. I didn’t steal from anyone who couldn’t *well* afford it. And I never used violence. I never even carried a weapon.”

The lines of Robert’s face grew grim once more. “I know all about the romantic mythology of the cat burglar. How cat burglars are supposed to rely on their wits and imagination instead of violence, how they only prey on the super rich and their insurance companies. You still broke into people’s homes. You still took what didn’t belong to you. You know that.”

“I know that.”

“And you justify that...how?”

There was no justification. Oh, Noel could have explained about growing up in a home where crime was the family business—and had been for generations—where cat burglary was viewed as typical of something a sissy youngest son who watched too many movies *would* come up with. He could have explained but it would have sounded like an excuse, and he didn’t make excuses. He was what he was—and considering what he’d come from, that wasn’t so bad. In fact, it was pretty amazing. In every sense, Noel was a self-made man, and knowing firsthand how little he’d had to work with, he was proud of that man.

But that man was still one of the bad guys—even if an ex-bad guy—in the eyes of Special Agent Robert Cuffe. That was the way it was.

“No answer?” Robert prodded curiously.

Noel shrugged. “I’m not proud of being a thief. I’m proud I never hurt anyone—except maybe in their tender insurance policies.”

“You were a predator. You damaged people, left them feeling violated and afraid.”

Noel’s fingers tightened around the crystal highball glass. “You want to talk about abuse? About damage? About feeling violated? Try growing up—” He

caught it back, forced himself to smile. He took a sip of his drink and blinked. Seven and Seven. Maybe he was a fool, but didn't it mean something that Robert still remembered what he drank?

He said more calmly, "Let's say it took me a while to learn I had other options."

"I know about your ties to the Chernov Russian crime family. You're Nicholas Chernov's youngest son. The black sheep of the family."

Noel didn't move a muscle. That was the only reason he didn't drop his glass.

"I'm not quite as stupid as you think I am."

Someone who seemed to be speaking on Noel's behalf said, "I don't think you're stupid. I never did."

Robert's smile was polite. "I wouldn't blame you if you did. There's no question my stupidity permitted you to slip away with the Boaz diamond ring."

"Ego maybe," Noel acknowledged. He liked Robert far too much to try and flatter him with polite fictions. "You did underestimate me."

"I did. Yeah." Robert pushed away from the sink and brought his drink over to the table. He sat down across from Noel. "I hadn't done my homework then. But I've devoted a lot of time and attention to you over the years, Noel, and I think I know you about as well as any man can know another."

"I'm flattered."

"Don't be. I had a lot of time on my hands after I was relocated to Wisconsin."

Noel cleared his throat. "I bet."

"So your story is you'd have retired even if you hadn't been injured?"

"It's the truth."

"Why would you have? You liked the money and you sure as hell liked the

rush.”

“Because I’m not stupid either and I knew my number was coming up.” Noel added wryly, “True, I didn’t expect my luck to run out on a mountain in the French Pyrenees.”

Robert’s lips tightened. He looked down at his drink. “It is ironic given the balconies and window ledges you scaled.”

“I wanted to be out by the time I was thirty. That was always my plan. I’d been making investments—good, solid, legal investments—the whole time I was working. I didn’t want to be climbing fire escapes when I was thirty, and I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder. I wanted...a life. A quiet, normal life.”

Robert made that spluttery sound. “And you decided the way to get that was cat burglary? You never considered, oh, I don’t know. Investment banking?”

“No.” Noel drained his glass. “Sandwiches for dinner okay with you? I’ve got to get this turkey ready and all the stuff that goes with it.”

Robert stared at him. “You think we’re having dinner together?”

Noel expelled a long, harsh breath. “I do. Yeah. I’m not stupid either. I don’t know what the hell is going on, but I do know that if you were only here to question me about a bunch of copycat burglaries, you wouldn’t have spent the day trotting around the countryside rescuing llamas and fixing generators. You wouldn’t have come at all. Given our history, you’d be the last person the Bureau would send.”

“Maybe I’m doing this on my own time.”

“*That*, I totally believe.”

Robert met his gaze without blinking and Noel felt his own resolve crumble. “And I’m not forgetting what you said about wanting to fuck me. I’d sort of prefer to make love, but whatever you want.” He shrugged.

Robert picked up his glass and finished his own drink.

Noel leaned forward. “Why are you here? What do you want, Robert?”

“Maybe I’m not sure myself.” That seemed to be further than Robert had meant to go because his face closed immediately.

Noel rose. He moved around the kitchen preparing thick sandwiches of roast beef and tomato on sourdough bread.

“You want to freshen our drinks?” He carried the plates to the front parlor.

He was opening the boxes of ornaments when Robert rejoined him with their drinks.

“You wait till Christmas Eve to trim your tree?” Robert picked up one of the sandwiches and took a huge bite, watching Noel sorting out the strings of lights.

“That’s the way we did it when I was growing up.” Noel threw Robert a look of inquiry.

“We used to get our tree the weekend after Thanksgiving. Christmas was a big deal in our house. Part of the fun was watching that mound of presents grow each day.” Robert smiled at the memory.

A shortage of presents had never been a problem for Noel. “Are you religious?”

“I never know what that question means. Do I believe in God?” Robert shrugged. “Yes. Do I go to church every Sunday? No. I don’t even go on Christmas day anymore.”

“But you used to?”

“When I was a boy, sure.”

He could picture Robert in church—in a blue suit and a hat—probably due to all those 1950s movies featuring steady, sober FBI agents who looked a lot like Robert. Tough guys who never failed to catch the gangsters but still had time to teach their kids to ride bikes and remembered to give their wives pearl necklaces on their wedding anniversaries.

Noel's family had not been remotely religious, but Christmas had always been a big deal. There was no fasting on Christmas Eve, no waiting for the first star, but there was always a twelve course supper—although the traditional dishes of borsch and stuffed cabbage were replaced with more trendy choices like smoked salmon and gallons of champagne. Grandfather Frost and the Snow Maiden brought the piles of presents on Christmas morning rather than New Year's Eve. In the afternoon all the men, by then well and truly soused, took their new motorcycles and sports cars out. Noel's eldest brother Nicky had been killed thirty years ago when he wrapped his new Honda CR-X around a telephone pole.

That was not to say Noel hadn't enjoyed Christmas as a kid. He had. It was only as he left the relative safety of his adolescence that it became more and more stressful. When Christmas stockings were replaced with recreational drugs and booze and expensive toys were replaced with well-trained prostitutes, when the pressure for him to take an active role in the family business began, it had dawned on him that the only thing he had in common with his nearest and dearest was an accident of birth.

It was only in later years that he had begun to consider the greater implications of the Christmas holiday—and to make an effort recapture some of the old joy he'd felt as a boy by creating his own holiday traditions. Such as they were. It would be nice, though probably fanciful, to think that perhaps this evening was the start of a new Christmas tradition.

Robert took another bite of sandwich, chewed, swallowed and said, "You know, because you can't do the climbing doesn't mean you're not still masterminding—"

"Don't." Noel dropped the string of lights, and rose quickly. More quickly than usual, which meant his balance was slightly off as he crossed the floor. He steadied himself on the table next to the sofa and then knelt in front of Robert. He could see the startled wariness in Robert's face. "No more games."

"I thought you liked games."

Noel shook his head. "Not with you. Not anymore. No."

Something changed in Robert's face. His thumb brushed Noel's cheekbone.

“No. I don’t want to hurt you this much.”

Noel turned his face against Robert’s hand. He closed his eyes when Robert stroked his hair.

There was wry humor in Robert’s voice. “Did anyone ever tell you, you look like an angel?”

My mother. But Noel didn’t want to remember. Had worked hard to forget.

“The first time I saw a photo of you,” Robert said, “I thought, anyone who looks that innocent *has* to be wicked as hell. Then I thought, how can I get him to look at me like that?”

Noel huffed a laugh and opened his eyes. “The first time I saw you, I thought, I could love that guy.”

Robert made a pained sound. “Jesus, Noel. There you are out on a ledge again. You scare the hell out of me.”

But it was Robert who made the first move.

* * *

It was safe in the darkness.

They could hold each other and kiss and pretend that the tenderness was as invisible as the dark silhouettes of rocking chair and mirrored armoire and antique bird cage. It was there all the same.

“I swear I never meant to hurt you,” Noel whispered as Robert’s mouth trailed down his ribcage. “I’m sorry, Robbie.”

Robert didn’t answer, but at least this time Noel knew the words had been heard. And in time they would be believed. That felt more important than forgiveness, assuming forgiveness was his—it felt like it was his in this sheltering velvety gloom.

The tenderness was what had been missing the first time, that first and last night. It had been a game back then—and they’d both been high on the rush—

he'd never had a more exciting night. Never, before or since, had sex been that good.

This was better.

Tonight Noel was high, too, intoxicated with desire, but what he desired was something very different. Almost shocking in its simplicity. He wanted Robert to be happy.

He wanted Robert to fuck him. Was glad to have it that way. He didn't need Robert's power under him and harnessed, he wanted it inside, filling him, warming him, ending the winter that had haunted him for so long. Maybe for a decade.

He liked Robert's gentleness, though it wasn't something he'd ever required from a bedmate before. He liked the caresses, liked being stroked and petted, liked the fact that Robert's hands were moving over him, slipping inside him, in a silent of assertion of ownership.

He wriggled agilely to accommodate the larger body lowering itself onto him. Robert, braced on his hands, stared down. His face was in shadow, his eyes a gleam, but Noel smiled up at him.

"Anything you want," he promised.

"I used to dream about this."

Elation flooded Noel's veins at that rough admission. He was acutely aware of the softness of the flannel sheets, the warmth of Robert's skin, the quick, hard beats of his heart. His heart or Robert's? He wasn't sure which was which. He couldn't ever recall feeling so alive. He could almost feel the moonlight brushing his skin. His own heart thrummed beneath his collarbone with something very like joy.

They shifted, resettled, and Robert's slippery fingers slid inside Noel, scissored, turned this way and that, loosening the quivering muscle. His touch was careful and attentive. There was nothing there of settling old scores or one-upmanship.

Noel reached out and they linked hands, laced fingers. Noel liked the strength that met his own, the fierce grip that held him—no chance of falling with a grip like that. He closed his eyes, focusing only on the feel of Robert pushing into his body.

“Okay?” Robert asked thickly.

“God. Yes.”

Robert began to thrust into him. Long, slow strokes at first, and Noel rose to meet them, shoving back. But almost immediately they seemed to lose the rhythm, disintegrating into mutual desperation, and the long, slow thrusts gave way to short, hard punches. Somehow they recovered the tempo, their bodies once more moving in unison, pacing each other, learning each other. It wouldn't take long, for all they'd waited ten years for it.

Noel freed his hands and pulled Robert closer, holding him tight, not wanting to forget one moment of this, committing every second to memory: the harsh wounded sounds of Robert's breath, the damp heat of his skin, the human, musky scent that was Robert and no one else.

When Robert's hot mouth covered his own, he opened to him, kissing him back with the same hunger, turned on by the idea that Robert's tongue was fucking his mouth even as his cock fucked Noel's ass. His own cock was trapped between them, rubbing hard along the silky rough line of belly hair tickling him with each powerful thrust of Robert's hips.

Noel's balls tightened, tingling heat washing through. Robert fucked him harder and faster and deeper until the moment seemed to stretch and stretch and grow timeless—unique and fragile as a snowflake against glass—and then Robert was coming, exquisite relief pulsing in satiny long jets.

Chapter Seven

The smell of fresh brewed coffee infiltrated his dreams.

Noel opened his eyes.

Christmas morning. His mouth curved. It was a long time since he'd felt this sort of anticipation for Christmas morning.

Through the half-raised window shades he could see the sun shining brightly, the trees feathered in white and the sugary hills beyond.

A floorboard squeaked and Robert walked into the bedroom with two cups of coffee. He wore jeans and Noel's black dressing gown, which was both tight across the shoulders and too short for him—and yet somehow totally sexy.

“Merry Christmas,” Noel said.

Robert gave him a look from beneath his dark brows and a funny little smile. “Merry Christmas.” He handed Noel one of the coffee cups.

“Just what I asked Santa for.”

Robert snorted. He sipped his coffee.

“You're a long way away,” Noel said.

Robert's lashes raised in surprise. Self-consciously, he sat on the foot of the bed. “No. I'm not.”

Noel stretched out his hand. Robert took it. Noel sipped his own coffee and tasted the sweetness of Baileys and the bite of whisky. He sighed. “This is nice.”

Robert nodded. “It is.” His gaze caught Noel's. Though his smile was guarded, there was something in his eyes that made Noel's heart speed up.

“So...you're planning to hang around today?” Noel stared at their laced hands.

“I thought I might.”

Neither of them spoke for a few quiet, surprisingly tranquil minutes.

Finally, Robert said, “Those phone calls every New Year’s Eve—”

“I guess...I wanted to apologize.”

“I did catch that much. It’s not that I wouldn’t have—if things had been different—”

“I think I understand. I just want you to know I never meant our relationship to hurt you.”

“Our relationship? You mean the fact that I was investigating you in the hopes of putting you in prison?”

“Yeah.” Noel met that crooked grin with one of his own. “Hey, all couples have their rough patches.”

Robert snorted. It was an endearing sound, Noel decided. He could picture Robert spluttering and snorting at him with that same amused exasperation twenty years from now. Maybe. Depending.

“If you had caught me, would you have sent me to prison?”

Robert’s smile faded. “One reason I never picked up that phone was that I didn’t want to ever have to make that choice.”

“Right.” Noel brooded over that. He looked up. “There wasn’t any copycat burglar, was there?”

“No.”

“You made that whole thing up about a string of cat burglaries fitting my MO.”

“Yep.”

“You never had any intention of arresting me.”

“You said yourself the statute of limitations has run out on your last known robbery.”

“You wanted an excuse to come and see me.”

Robert grunted. “I’m not going to pretend I didn’t want to see you sweat a little. Actually, I wanted to see you sweat a *lot*.”

Noel grimaced. “But you read the last book, right? You read *Crawl Space*?”

“Those *books*.” Robert’s groan sounded genuine. “And that *last* one.”

“I was trying to apologize.”

“I preferred the drunken phone calls.”

Noel pulled his hand free. “You know those books are very popular.”

“Yes. I do know that.”

Noel retreated behind his coffee cup.

“Noel.”

Noel looked up.

“I didn’t want to be alone this Christmas. That’s the truth. I can’t pretend that my feelings for you through the years have always been, uh, tender, but I never forgot you. I made a point of keeping track of you, and I never stopped wondering what things could be like if you really could go straight. Legally speaking.”

“Same here.”

“I can’t say I had a real plan when I decided to come here. I only knew I wanted to see you again. In a crazy way, you’ve been one of the constants in my life.”

“It’s been the same for me.”

They both seemed to consider this for a few moments.

“How would this work?” Noel finally steeled himself to ask. “*Could* it work?”

“Unlike your friend with the greenhouse, I don’t pretend to know the future. But regardless of what happens with us, I’m through with the Bureau.”

“You’re *not* with the Bureau?”

Robert shook his head.

“You *quit*?”

“I quit.”

After the initial surge of relief, Noel was conscious of a wave of guilt. Was the decision to leave the FBI what Robert honestly wanted? Or was it what he was stuck with after Noel had inadvertently sabotaged his career?

He said tentatively, “Are you okay with that?”

“Honestly? Yes. It was time for a change. I realized a long time ago a lot of the fun went out of it for me when you dropped out of the game.” Robert set his coffee cup on the floor, reached over, took Noel’s cup and put it on the nightstand. “So, having seen firsthand how busy your social calendar is, I was thinking I better find out now what your plans are for New Year’s.”

Noel laughed, reaching for him. “I was planning on a quiet evening at home. Maybe phone a friend.”

His mouth a kiss away from Noel’s, Robert said, “Angel, I’m going to save you a fortune on long distance charges.”

About the Author

A distinct voice in gay fiction, multi-award-winning author Josh Lanyon has been writing gay mystery and romance for over a decade. In addition to numerous short stories, novellas and novels, Josh is the author of the critically acclaimed Adrien English series, including *The Hell You Say*, winner of the 2006 *USA Book News* award for GLBT Fiction. Josh is an EPIC Award winner and a three-time Lambda Literary Award finalist. Josh is also the author of the definitive M/M writing guide *Man, Oh Man! Writing M/M Fiction for Kinks Ca\$h*. To learn more about Josh, please visit www.joshlanyon.com or join his mailing list at groups.yahoo.com/group/JoshLanyon.



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